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THE THORNE SMITH 3-DECKER

BOOKS BY THORNE SMITH

The Thorne Smith 3-Decker : *The Glorious Pool* : *Skin and Bones* : *Rain in the Doorway* : *The Bishop's Jaegers* : *Topper Takes a Trip* : *Turnabout* : *The Night Life of the Gods* : *The Stray Lamb* : *Topper* : *Did She Fall?* : *Dream's End* : *Biltmore Oswald* : *Out o' Luck* : *Haunts and By-Paths*

THE THORNE SMITH 3-DECKER

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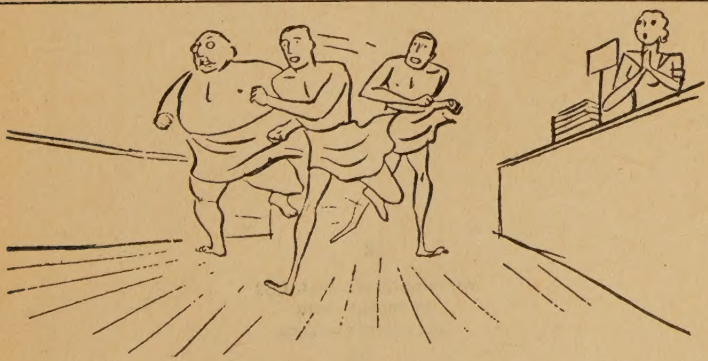

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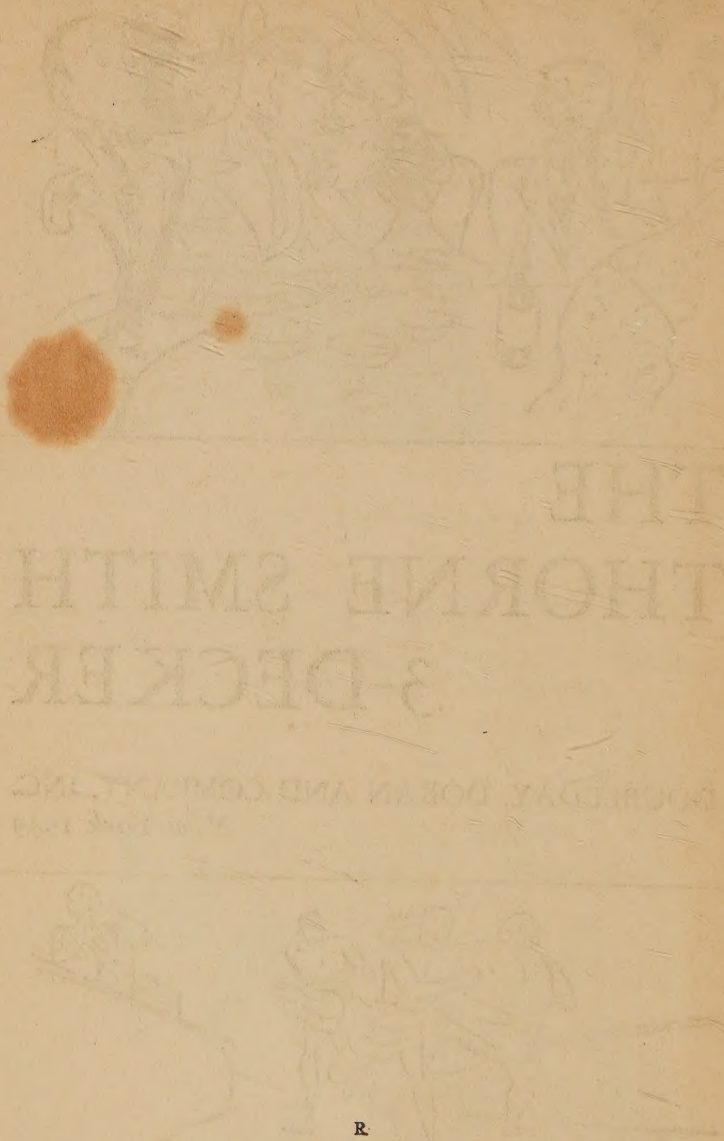

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Chapter I. Spines in Transit

MR. T. LAWRENCE LAMB WEAVED HIS LONG, SHAD-BELLIED body down the aisle, and as one sorely stricken in affliction, crumpled into a seat. He hoped prayerfully that the other half of it would remain unoccupied. He hoped even more prayerfully that if it should be occupied it would not be by anyone he knew even remotely. Every evening he hoped this and almost every evening his hope was disregarded.

Mr. Lamb automatically elevated his knees. Out came his paper and off went the train. All set. Another day smeared.

He sighed profoundly. So far so good. No one had yet encroached upon his Jovian aloofness. Perhaps for a change he would get the best of the break. Adjusting his features in what he fondly believed to be a repellent expression he prepared to concentrate his attention on the financial section of his newspaper. His heart was not in it. Neither was his mind. Lamb was in a vagrant mood—misanthropic, critical, at odds with himself.

"Here we sit," he mused—his eyes darkly contemplating his fellow commuters—"Here we sit, the lot of us, a trainful of spines in transit . . . so many sets of vertebræ, each curved and twisted according to the inclination of its individual owner."

His eyes rested unenthusiastically on a man he heartily disliked, Simonds, a purveyor of choice lots.

"Take Simonds there," he continued to reflect. "That spawn of hell is just a lot of vertebræ all curled up. I myself am scarcely more than a column of vertebræ. And that old lady over there, she's a repository of vertebræ, old tortured vertebræ, no doubt extremely brittle . . . museum pieces."

He sighed morbidly over the great age and brittleness of the old lady's vertebræ, and rearranged his own, flexing them deftly between the seat and its back. His knees crept up higher

in front of him. His head sank lower. He was gradually jackknifing into his favorite commuting position.

For some inexplicable reason vertebræ this evening seemed unusually important to Lamb. They were almost getting the best of him. The more he thought of vertebræ the lower his spirits ebbed. There were too many commuters, all trying to contort themselves into the most comfortable, the most restful positions—all striving to do well for their backs after the strain of the day.

Tentatively Lamb peered into his newspaper. He fully intended to wash his hands of vertebræ and to study the details of a new bond issue.

There were newspapers everywhere—evening newspapers. Alluring tabloids with impartially quartered front pages displayed one pair of robust legs, one good corpse, a sanguinary railway accident, and a dull-looking pugilist. What more could any reasonable person crave?

Lamb studied the absorbed readers with detached animosity. Papers were being held at every conceivable angle, some negligently, untidily, others grasped tenaciously as if their owners lived in momentary dread of being deprived of their comfort. Some readers scanned their papers from afar. Others approached them secretively, nose touching type.

"Newspapers and vertebræ," elaborated Lamb, eyeing the suspended sheets bitterly. "That's all we are. That's all we're good for."

In the third seat in front of him sat a dignified old gentleman. He was having tough cerebration assimilating the fact that red ants greatly deplore the existence of essence of peppermint. For sixty-odd years he had managed to struggle through life without the benefit of this information. Now it had become urgent business with him. He must tell his wife about it the first thing. No more red ants for them. Then he tried to remember if they had ever suffered from red ants.

Farther down the aisle was a man whose expression grew bleaker and bleaker. He was following a comic strip. His concentration was almost pathetic. When he arrived at the grand climax he sat as one stunned, gazing hopelessly ahead of him.

One would have been led to believe that he had suddenly received a piece of extremely depressing news.

In another seat, crouched like a dog over a bone, an ingrown-looking individual was enjoying a vicarious thrill from the sex irregularities of a music teacher and a casual man of God. Satisfyingly salacious stuff. Shocking. However, this particular commuter would not discuss the sordid affair with his wife. Such topics are better left outside the family circle.

Meanwhile the landscape.

Lamb turned to the window and considered a rapidly receding cow. Then his glance ran through the train. Nobody else was considering that cow. Nobody else was considering anything other than newspapers so far as he could discover. Yet the cow had not been without its points . . . a pleasant, contemplative, square-cut cow. And that brook out there. Lamb wondered idly where it wandered, through whose back yard, through what meadows and woodlands. Lamb himself was wandering now far from the financial section.

No scenery in all God's world, he decided, was quite so unobserved, left quite so utterly flat and to its own devices as those sections traversed by these hurtling slave galleys of progress. For the commuter familiarity with the landscape completely skipped mere contempt and passed into the realms of non-existence.

If that proud home-owner laboring out there on his lawn could only realize how unappreciated his efforts were he would not feel so infernally smug about things. Perhaps, thought Lamb, the man would give up gadgeting about with garden implements and devote his time to disguising the flavor of bootleg gin—a far more utilitarian and artistic pursuit.

Especially this evening, Lamb's thoughts ran on, was the landscape neglected. Eyes looked upon it, but for the most part indifferently, unseeingly. Newspapers were to blame. Lamb worried his own paper. Commuting trains everywhere, he reflected, were more or less spiritually akin. That was the awfulness of it. His feeling of inferiority and sameness deepened. His mood grew more restless. It was gathering in revolt.

What was he himself but a poor doomed commuter, a

catcher and quitter of trains? His destiny stood confronting him, smirking at him. Years from now he would be extending a withered and feeble hand clutching a commutation ticket to be punched. He wondered if conductors ever died or grew old. They never seemed to, always stayed about the same—loquacious mummies.

A good Grade A, case-hardened commuter, decided Lamb, would experience but scant difficulty in meeting his soul's brother in any part of the world where commuting trains operated. With this creature he would be able to discuss his favorite topic in his own pet vernacular. Neither of them would give a tinker's dam about the scenery. They would consider it in no terms other than those of building and real-estate development—investment opportunity. With an inner ear, Lamb harkened to a hypothetical conversation:

"That's a neat bit of wooded highland," observes commuter A covetously.

"Yep," says B. "It's just itching to be opened up."

"Wish I had the ready to go in for a proposition like that," replies his friend.

"Man alive," says the other, "if I had the backing, that property wouldn't stay undeveloped long. Give me just six months, and I'd have a couple of paved streets run through and a row of model homes—."

He pauses and frowns masterfully at the hillside.

"And garages," adds commuter A, not to be outdone. "Bang up sewerage and a garbage-disposal plant. That sort of stuff gets the right class of buyer."

The wooded hillside is doomed. Its trees shiver. Trees have a way of knowing about such things. Soon wayward lovers will be seeking elsewhere for stimulating concealment. A neat little garage will have usurped their bower.

"My God!" muttered T. Lawrence Lamb, now thoroughly in revolt against the ordained measure of his days. "I'm a part of the system. I'm all tied up."

Then quite suddenly his attention became riveted on an object.

It was an ear.

Chapter II. The Ear Obtrudes

AN UNQUALIFIED FACT. THE OBJECT AT WHICH MR. LAMB WAS gazing with such rapt attention was nothing more nor less than an ear. A small pink ear. A perky shred of an ear. And this ear in turn was ornamenting a small sleek head. Exceedingly black hair, closely trimmed—a severe yet successful bob, becoming only to about one woman in a thousand.

"That's a mean-looking ear," mused Lamb. "Looks like a wicked horse's. Snakish sort of a head too, probably filled with all sorts of schemes and misery."

Yet, even as he gazed, Lamb attempted to reject the existence of the ear. He was not, he assured himself, actually looking at it. He was merely resting his eyes. In a moment or so he would return once more to his newspaper. As a matter of fact, his paper was so held as to be ready for immediate action. For instance, if the head to which the ear was attached should chance to reverse its position, Lamb could instantly take to cover. Meanwhile, if the ear happened to cross his field of vision that regrettable circumstance could hardly be obviated. It was not of his seeking. As he had previously done with vertebræ, he now proceeded to do with the ear. He washed his hands of it. He firmly set it aside. That silly-looking ear was really no concern of his.

Unconsciously Lamb found himself wondering just how it would feel to bite that ear ever so delicately—tentatively, so to speak. What would its owner say? What would she do? Bite back most likely. White teeth, small active teeth, somehow went with that ear. A brazen character too, daring and unrestrained. A thoroughly objectionable female type. Even from the little Lamb had seen, he considered the owner of the ear a demoralizing influence.

Anyone observing Lamb would not have suspected him capable of such an odd line of thought. Lamb himself was far

from being aware of the fact that he was a thoroughly unmoral man, a sort of warmed-over pagan as judged by all standards of conventional morality. Otherwise that ear would not have disturbed him so profoundly, would not have lured him away from consideration of finance and industry.

When the gods were fabricating Mr. T. Lawrence Lamb they were far from being single-minded about it. There had been a certain divergence of opinion, a lamentable lack of harmony. Some had contended, not without reason, that there were already too many commuters cluttering up the earth, too many hard-headed, conscientious home-owners, too many undeviating husbands and proud fathers. Humanity was becoming too stable, too standardized. It needed more highly spiced and less orthodox representatives. Other gods were firmly convinced that in order to allow themselves a few gracious liberties and privileges and at the same to create a favorable public opinion it would be a far wiser thing to keep humanity more or less at a dead level, to make appetites and desires as orderly as possible, and to reduce imagination to a safe and sane minimum. It is to be remembered that these dissenting gods were the greatest hell-raisers on high and that they brought forward their contentions merely to further their own selfish ends and to assure themselves of unexamined enjoyment of their rather indelicate pursuits.

Unfortunately, though outnumbered, these gods represented a small but active minority, and the result with Lamb was an acrimonious compromise, an incongruous blending of strongly opposed elements. Outwardly Lamb looked and acted like a sober, responsible and respected member of the community—one of its more solid members. Lamb firmly believed himself to be every bit of that. But the inner Lamb, the true Lamb, was not quite so good. There was little conformity in him, scant reverence for the established order of things. Consequently Lamb was the seat of much mental and spiritual conflict, of many stray, orphaned thoughts. Within himself he contained an unplumbed reservoir of good, healthy depravity that was constantly threatening to overflow and to spill all sorts of trouble about his feet.

Lamb's face, like his body, was long. His skin was dark and expression somewhat saturnine. His eyes looked out on life always a trifle sardonically. His associates believed him to be a capable, serious-minded man, whereas in reality he was filled with a sort of desperately good-natured irony. For purposes of self-protection he was often brusk and caustic. It was just as well for everybody concerned that many of the remarks that sprang uninvited to his lips were quickly stifled. He had a wife who considered herself both artistic and intellectual. Lamb heartily detested these qualities, little realizing he possessed them himself to a high degree.

He enjoyed sitting with his knees elevated and his arms waving vaguely above his head. In this position he gave the impression of a semi-recumbent cheer leader. It was his most effective pose. He could explain things better that way. When customers came to him for financial advice they usually found him in this position, his desk being used solely for the purpose of supporting his knees. As he talked to them, his hands churning about in the air seemed to be juggling the industries and public utilities of a nation. Fascinated, his callers saw golden opportunity dancing before their eyes. Lamb's success as a financier lay in the fact that he was often eloquently inarticulate—staccato. When necessary he could be masterfully blasphemous. His selling talks left much to the imagination. An overhead scrambling of the hands, a tortured oath or so, and a lowering scowl were sufficient to crumble the opposition of the most opinionated investor.

In his dress he somehow always managed to be smartly disheveled, always slightly sprinkled with cigarette ashes. His manners were not good. They were natural. At forty he no longer cared a rap whether or not he ever sold another bond. Like his fathers before him, he was the Lamb of Lamb & Co. Exactly who or what the "Co." represented people had given up speculating. Customers knew that Lamb alone was sufficient. They deferred to his judgment and absorbed his bonds. Lamb had never ceased to be both pleased and surprised by his success. He was conscientious about other people's money. The well-established reputation of Lamb & Co. had not suffered

under his management. He was proud of it, but just a little fed up. This he scarcely realized. Fortunately for the business no one ever sensed the lurking instability of the man, least of all Lamb himself.

His wife found it convenient to regard him as an unimaginative plodder—a money-grubber. Lamb no longer bothered his head about her opinion. In his eyes she had long been a matrimonial washout. Occasionally he found enjoyment in annoying her. For years she had been trying to subjugate him, to mold him to her ways of life. Today he was as inexplicable and as recalcitrant as when he had just married her. He was not a satisfactory husband. He knew this and was pleased. He failed utterly to harmonize with Mrs. Lamb's background, yet there he was and there probably he would be always with his long legs and mocking face. Mrs. Lamb often wished she had married an unqualified fool instead of this dark, ambling creature on whom she could make no impression.

It was essential to Mrs. Lamb's happiness that she should always make an impression. She feared Lamb's unuttered observations and never felt quite securely poised in the presence of his enigmatic grin. Lamb was no household comfort. He cramped his wife's style dreadfully. His daughter a little more than liked him. Together they considered life critically, cynically, and just a bit coarsely. With the aid of Hebe, Lamb at times became a jovial vulgarian. It was a relief to him, an outlet. With everyone else he automatically acted the part of the conventional, unemotional, complacent business man he fondly believed himself to be.

And for that reason the ear offended him. Lamb disliked philandering, yet for some reason or other, he felt that with very little persuading he could bring himself to philander with that ear. For several weeks he had been observing it in a casual, detached way. It was such a ridiculously small ear—the merest pretence of an ear. Why should a full-grown man like himself trouble about such a trifle? He was well past the age of foolishness. His own daughter was nearly as old as the ear. Anyway, the whole idea was out of the question. Yet the ear

was undeniably a challenge. And that small sleek head so independently perched on a nice-looking neck, that too, was not without its appeal.

Strange to say, Mr. Lamb had never looked on the countenance of the owner of the ear. He had not even tried to push his investigations that far. He had felt it safer to let bad enough alone. He had ideas about the face, vague speculations, but he did not dwell on them. Why should he? Of what interest was it to him? Rubbish!

The train was slowing down for his station. Experienced commuters were already collecting their inevitable packages from the racks. Mr. Lamb methodically folded his newspapers and dismissed the ear from his thoughts—that is, he half rose preparatory to making his way down the aisle when quite unexpectedly the ear turned, and Mr. Lamb sat down hurriedly like one suddenly atrophied. The man was shocked to the core. He felt himself being intimately caressed by a pair of incredibly melting eyes set in a face whose pallor is usually associated with innate vice. There was a mouth too, vivid and terribly defenceless, and at the same time quite capable.

It was one of the most alarming experiences in Mr. Lamb's life. Those eyes. The languor in them. What a way for a women to look at a man in public! The only word Lamb could think of in connection with those eyes was "voluptuous." They were actually voluptuous eyes, yet strange to say, they were unconsciously so. The girl did not know what she was doing. She could not possibly know.

"A creature with eyes like that," thought Lamb, "should be forced to wear smoked glasses."

She was more dangerous than a floating mine in the path of shipping. Her very innocence increased her potency. For some inexplicable reason Lamb smelled the fragrance of branches heavily ladened with blossoms and caught a glimpse of a Chinese print he had once intended to buy.

The girl had turned her face away. Simonds, the bounder, was pausing to talk with her. The girl was smiling a slow, provocative smile, and Simonds, fool that he was, seemed to be ghoulishly pleased.

"She's cooking up something," thought Lamb. "The Jezebel —a regular Messalina, that girl—a she devil."

The train was gradually emptying. Lamb half rose again to make his way out. Then her eyes met his for a second time, and once more Mr. Lamb felt himself transfixed.

This was all nonsense. He rallied and calmly returned the girl's gaze. Then he finished folding his paper, rose snappily and left the train.

"What the hell!" he kept saying to himself. "What the hell!"

Chapter III. The Ear Has Legs

STILL NUMBED BY THE HIGH VOLTAGE OF THOSE PASSIONATE eyes—Mr. Lamb had slightly refined his first expletive—he made his way down the aisle and mingled with his kin on the station platform. In his deep abstraction he failed to respond with his customary briskness to the salutations of his friends.

" 'Lo there, Lamb, how's the boy?" passed unchallenged as did, "Evening Larry, how's tricks?" and other such innocuous inquiries.

Following the trail of commuters up the circular stairs, Lamb paused in the waiting-room by the newspaper counter and looked through a window at the glittering array of waiting motors. Some of them were already pulling out bearing their complacently successful owners homeward through the neat well-ordered streets of that opulent suburban town.

Ordinarily this massing of wealth, this tangible evidence of purchasing power would have given Mr. Lamb a comfortable sense of security. It would have made him feel that all was well with the state of the nation and that under the beneficent guidance of a cautious administration prosperity was assured. This evening, however, Lamb looked upon the automobiles without elation. They were mostly being driven by wives and daughters—smartly togged women for whom this moment

constituted one of the high spots of the day. Any woman so unfortunate as to be forced to meet her bread-winner in an outmoded car was the object of some pity and no little secret self-congratulation. Her costume was examined a little more critically, and questions were asked about her husband. Did he count or was he unimportant? Why did people like that try to hold their own in such a well-to-do community? There were other commuting towns. Nice little places where they would feel more at home.

The bemused Lamb picked out his own well-groomed automobile and dwelt on its handsome lines unappreciatively. There was his daughter at the wheel. A good girl Hebe, but after all was she really good? Was any woman fundamentally good? Lamb was none too sure.

He saw another person standing by his car. A young man in white flannels, light sweater, and sport shoes. A well-set-up youngster. Obviously very much absorbed in Hebe. This youth was leaning over the side of the automobile, and Mr. Lamb was struck by the lithe, unconscious grace of the vigorous young body. A fine-looking pair those two made. A romantic splash of color and animation. Romance—that was for them. They still had time ahead. Heaps of it. His was rapidly running low.

Without realizing how far he was going, Lamb leaned over the newspaper counter and attempted to strike an attitude similar to that held by the youth. The effect was somewhat surprising. The counter was low, and Lamb was long. As a result of this combination Lamb appeared to be sprawlingly, jauntily, suggestively confidential. The newspaper man looked at him with startled eyes for a moment, then mistaking Mr. Lamb's motives, approached slowly and leaned tensely forward across the counter. Unconscious of the man's presence, Mr. Lamb maintained the immobility of his peculiar position. Believing that he might be still too far away to receive the delicate communication Mr. Lamb desired to make, the newspaper man drew even nearer, placed his ear to the other's lips and waited expectantly.

For a long moment this odd tableau remained fixed as if in wax, then the man's curiosity got the better of him.

"Shoot, Mr. Lamb," he murmured. "Something good?"

Slowly Mr. Lamb turned. It took a little time for him to realize the full import of the situation. All he could see at first was an avid ear. Then he drew back as if stung and gazed blankly at the vendor of papers. Why was the creature so breathlessly expectant? With a shiver of apprehension he suddenly realized the full significance of the situation. He looked down at his unnaturally cascading body and immediately assumed a more normal position.

"What?" he asked, fighting for time. "What's that you said about something being good?"

"Oh, nothing," replied the man defensively. "From the way you were leaning over, I thought you wanted to whisper something. You know, something sort of—er—racy."

The newspaper man had barely avoided the use of the word "dirty." In his substitution of "racy" for it, he felt he had achieved a conversational triumph. Nevertheless, he considered himself cheated—let down. Mr. Lamb regarded him with growing disapproval. He studied the eager eyes and half-parted lips. Sedulously he avoided the ear. That face, he feared, that repellent face would henceforth haunt his dreams.

"No," he replied at last. "There seems to have been some misunderstanding. Those stairs got me. I was merely resting. It must be the weather. Somehow I feel quite worn out this evening."

He turned wearily, his shoulders suddenly sagged, and arranging his body in lines of utter exhaustion he dragged his feet away from the presence of the hateful person behind the counter. Lamb was not cut out to be an actor. His idea of feigning fatigue was far too elaborate. It was arresting but lacked conviction. Mr. Lamb had never progressed in such a remarkable way in the whole course of his life. He looked as if he had been mortally wounded and was blindly making his way toward human aid.

How many others had witnessed his momentary madness, he wondered. How many eyes had dilated at the sight of his

humiliating posture? Had the ear chanced to see his breakdown? Lamb was filled with panic.

"Sort of a funny place to pick out for a rest," pondered the mystified newspaper man, looking after the half-crouching figure of Mr. Lamb. "Hope he makes his car before he drops in his tracks."

The object of his solicitude was by this time painfully approaching his automobile. He was relieved to see that the youth he had so disastrously attempted to imitate had departed, but was not at all reassured by the puzzled look of inquiry in his daughter's eyes.

"What happens to have broken down in you, major?" the young lady demanded in a cool, censorious voice. "From that peculiar walk you appear to be practicing, I'd say you needed a hot water bottle and a dose of castor—"

"Don't!" interrupted Mr. Lamb sharply. "You may be right. Perhaps I do, but why advertise my shame to the entire community? Would you like to have people pointing out your father as a man who has or is about to take a dose of castor-oil? Do you desire to drag your own flesh and blood through the dust of these streets? And why do you persist in calling me major?"

"As for the dust of these streets," the girl replied, "you seem to be doing the dragging of your own free will. How came you to get your middle section all bunged up like that? And why are you crouching before me like a jackal about to spring? One would think you'd checked your stomach somewhere. And that agonized shuffle of yours. Why did you embark on that?"

Mr. Lamb looked at his daughter with hopeless eyes. With a deep sigh he opened the door to the front seat and crawled in beside her.

"My stomach got itself that way," he explained briefly. "Don't know exactly how it did it. Had a frightful day in the city. Dog-tired."

Why had he ever attempted to deceive that hellish newspaper vendor with such an obviouly artificial walk? It had

only succeeded in making matters worse. Now he must somehow save his face. His daughter was regarding him with an undermining look of sympathy. Lamb essayed a groan. Perhaps that might help a little.

"If you go on like that," observed Hebe, "you'll not only be dragging yourself through the dust, but you will actually have to get a prop for your stomach to keep your head from bouncing along on your feet."

"A horrid picture," thought Lamb. Then to keep his daughter's mind from dwelling any longer on the subject, he asked abruptly:

"Just who was that emaciated-looking loafer who was practically swooning all over my car just now?"

"That emaciated-looking loafer," replied Hebe unemotionally, "might be occupying the position of your son-in-law at any minute now. You'd better be careful how low you classify him. I have an idea he was admiring my legs. So many people do."

The physical collapse aroused himself sufficiently to consider his daughter's legs. He had always been interested in legs.

"Is that so?" he remarked. "Well, if he wasn't near-sighted to the point of blindness, he must have got an eyeful."

"Father dear," admonished the girl, "I am still but a child."

"Not with those legs," replied Lamb. "From the way that fellow was peering into the car you would have thought he was trying to learn your legs by heart, or to subject them to the third degree."

"And why not?" demanded Hebe ominously. "What's wrong with the legs?"

"Don't like them," said Lamb. "They're too vigorous. Interminable legs. Do they never come to an end?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," said Hebe. "They're better than Sapho's legs. Not so frank and confiding."

Hebe was alluding to her mother, who had unfortunately been christened Mary, and who because of her penchant for amateur dramatics, had been renamed Sapho by her daughter. The name had been gratefully accepted by Mrs. Lamb. She

was strongly of the opinion that she deserved it. Mary Lamb would not have been a livable name.

"You might be right," agreed Mr. Lamb. "Your mother's legs seem to be pretty well all over the place these days. Yours are a little less visible at least."

He paused to consider the subject in all its ramifications. Hebe at times was quite a relief. Only she understood how to treat unimportant matters with academic thoroughness.

"You know," he went on reminiscently. "In spite of Sapho's extreme leggishness, I personally don't seem to see them any more—not as legs, if you get what I mean. But she must have had legs at one time, I suppose."

"Certainly," replied Hebe, "or else I wouldn't be here."

"Logically arrived at," agreed Mr. Lamb, "although your way of putting it has rather indelicate implications. Your parental respect also needs a little brushing up."

They were alone now, the other automobiles having departed, and a new flock was arriving for the next contingent of commuters. Neither father nor daughter seemed to care whether they ever reached home or not. The casual ways of the pair were quite a trial to Mrs. Lamb. They were not popular around the house.

"Speaking of legs," observed Hebe casually, "yon' is an upstanding pair of shafts."

She pointed directly across the street, and Mr. Lamb's eyes followed the direction of his inelegant daughter's finger. The shafts referred to belonged to a pair of arms busily intent on carrying several large bundles from the delicatessen store. Lamb looked on the legs with instinctive covetousness, then, like a frightened rabbit, froze defensively to his seat. They were the legs of the ear.

"Uh-hoo!" bawled Hebe's uncultured voice. "Uh-hoo, Sandy! Over here!"

"Don't!" pleaded her father. "Don't make that awful noise. You sound like some sort of animal."

"Over here!" shouted Hebe with unabated enthusiasm. "We'll take you home."

The legs paused in their progress, altered their course, and came forward attractively in spite of the bundles.

"That ear would have such legs," thought Lamb.

There was something startlingly personal about them. They were vicious legs—suggestive. Lamb decided he had never seen such demoralizingly feminine legs. And Lamb was not elated. He had a premonition of change, of some complication arising to disturb the comfortable regularity of his life. He seriously resented this. He was Lamb of Lamb & Co., a contented, successful man. He was all set—had his own interests. Why should those legs come walking into his life? With characteristic thoroughness he washed his hands of the legs. Nevertheless, washed or unwashed, the legs continued to approach.

"Swarm in," said Hebe urgently to the girl. "Slither over the major and drop your bundles in the back."

"Why do we all have to huddle up here in the front seat like so many immigrants?" asked Lamb inhospitably. "Let me get out. I'll sit behind. Willingly. Gratefully."

In spite of his protest, the legs brushed past Mr. Lamb's knees and arranged themselves alarmingly beside him.

"This is your father—yes?" asked the girl. "Is he a nice father? He doesn't sound very. Is he?"

"He's too long," answered Hebe briefly.

"And drawn-out, perhaps?" suggested the other.

"Exactly," agreed Hebe. "That's just it. He's too long and drawn-out. Take his neck for instance."

"Me take his neck!" cried her friend. "You suggest I should take your father's neck. How amiable!"

Mr. Lamb noticed that her voice was surprisingly deep and rich and that she spoke with an insinuatingly rising inflection. An unwholesomely foreign type, he decided.

"You're mistaken," he hastened to assure the girl. "My daughter didn't mean for you literally to take my neck. She meant for you merely to look at it. She seems to think it's too long."

The girl scrutinized Mr. Lamb's neck avidly. Mr. Lamb thanked God that he was a cleanly man.

"Why, I love that neck!" she suddenly exclaimed, and Lamb was both relieved and outraged. "I think I could neck with that neck."

"What sort of friend is this, Hebe?" asked Lamb. "Something imported?"

His mood was waxing retaliatory.

"Her name's Sandra," replied his daughter, "and in a manner of speaking she is imported. Russian on her mother's side. A nice girl but prone to folly."

"Name doesn't sound quite real," observed Lamb. "Does she work in an office?"

"Not Sandra," he was informed. "She's a swell model. Underwear and things."

"You should see me," put in Sandra enthusiastically. "Then I am at my best. Then you would make me much. But to return to the neck, tell me, Hebe, your father doesn't neck, perhaps?"

"Not sure," said that young lady impersonally. "I doubt it. His sex life is practically nil."

"Well, I'll be damned!" ejaculated Lamb, rapidly changing color.

"Such a big man too," replied the other girl sympathetically. "The poor thing must be starved for some loving."

"Hear that, major?" said Hebe. "What you got to say?"

"I wash my hands of the both of you," came the emphatic response. "Never did I hear such stuff. Do all young women go on nowadays like you two?"

"This is mild," his daughter calmly informed him. "So far, we have respected your feelings."

"But I won't any longer," cried Sandra tragically. "He is trying to go back on himself. He is taking a flat leave of me. I must tell all. For weeks this man has been devouring with hungry eyes the back of my head. Do not deny it, major. I have watched you in my mirror. Today I regarded him with these eyes."

Here she cast these eyes wildly about the automobile, and Mr. Lamb became slightly dizzy. He was glad he was not driving.

"Today I observed him eye to eye, so to speak, and he

wilted—wilted before my gaze. Now he would wash his hands of me. Do not let him do that, Hebe. Do not let him wash. I shall not be washed by this long Lamb, do you hear? I shall remain unwashed forever."

On this high note of resolve the emotional young woman paused for breath and gazed magnificently about her. Mr. Lamb was filled with amazement and consternation. The complication had arrived. He was embroiled.

"You may remain unwashed forever, so far as I am concerned," he remarked soothingly. "I shall make no attempt to wash you."

"Good!" she exclaimed with a pleased expression. "I knew you would make me much. And now I depart."

The car drew up before a small, neat-looking home of the modest order, and the girl quickly slipped out.

"Bring him yourself the first time, Hebe," she said. "After that he will come alone."

"By stealth and at night," added Hebe.

"I shall do nothing of the sort," Mr. Lamb retorted emphatically. "Neither alone nor accompanied do I come. The two of you have gone far in depravity. I wash—"

"For goodness' sake, no more washing," protested Hebe. "We're all washed out as it is."

The other girl stood gazing soulfully at Lamb for a moment, then she observed complacently, as if addressing the world at large, "The Long Lamb will come, never fear. I shall have him."

"Stop talking like an adultress in a French farce and go away," urged Lamb. "I want to get home and snatch a drink."

"I shall make you suffer for that," she retorted.

With an emotional swirl of her scanty skirt, Sandra turned and hurried up the walk to the small house. Mr. Lamb in spite of his resolution, followed with his eyes the retreating figure, missing no details of its trim lines.

"Well, major, what do you think of Sandy?" his daughter asked. "Fairly hot stuff, what?"

"Torrid," Lamb agreed. "Does she always go on like that or is this some sort of maidenly pastime you two indulge in?"

Hebe grinned.

"That's for you to find out," she said. "As for me I've discovered the cause of your weird conduct when you left the train just now. Sandy had regarded you with these eyes. Brace up, major. You're a favored man."

"Drive on," growled Mr. Lamb, "and for God's sake don't be an ass."

Chapter IV. The Little Russet Man Appears

STRANGELY ENOUGH HEBE HEEDED HER PARENT'S PLAIN-spoken admonition, which both of them knew without saying amounted to nothing less than an abject supplication. One glance at her father's face was sufficient to convince her that his long-repressed emotional arrangements were in a state of fermenting chaos which threatened at any moment to produce revolutionary results of an impredicable nature.

Thereafter she devoted her youth and energy to the business of driving, taking full advantage the while of that great liberality the law extends to the young and not unfavored daughters of prominent citizens of all well-regulated communities. Lamb was too busily engaged in washing his hands of practically everything to notice his close and constant companionship with painful injury and sudden death.

Hebe drove. She drove in the direction of that place in which Mr. T. Lawrence Lamb sought refuge and repose after the contemplative quietude of a short yet most unprofitable day.

As if preordained by a class-conscious God with an eye to real estate values, this fair mansion was situated on the financially correct side of the tracks.

In most commuting towns of any recognized worth there are always two sides of which the tracks serve as a line of demarcation. There is the right side and the wrong side. Translated into terms of modern American idealism, this means, the rich side and the side that hopes to be rich.

On either side of the tracks there sometimes extends a quarter—a blot—that is not rich, will never be rich, and makes no visible effort to be rich. The blot thrives squalidly amid its fights, sufferings, and enjoyments. It is fundamentally superior to either side of the tracks, because it envies neither, regarding all members of the community as legitimate prey.

Properly speaking, however, those who dwell on one side of the tracks form a separate and distinct race from those who have their being on the other side. The rich side is naturally of finer clay, superior morally, physically and intellectually. And it is the bounden duty of those who dwell on the rich side to defend its borders against the untimely incursions of the financially striving side. Between the two a silently genteel yet none the less bitter guerrilla warfare is in constant progress. No pickets are visible, no orders to halt are audibly voiced, no hostilities are openly exchanged. Nevertheless, there is a certain sense of vigilance. They shall not pass, is the order of the day.

By nature Mr. Lamb was too indolent and skeptical to care a rap about either side. By the accident of birth and inherited wealth he was well above the battle. One side of the tracks was as good to him as the other. He lived where he did, not from his own choice, but because the house had been left to him by those who had gone before after having lived in it themselves and had their fill of it. The modern plumbing and other embellishments were of Mrs. Lamb's contrivance. Like other members of her ilk, she believed, for some obscure reason, that the rich side of the tracks was also the aristocratic side. She was one of those aspiring wives who would have ruined her husband's health, hopes, and happiness in her efforts to drive him across the tracks to the right side, had Fate seen fit to have placed her on the wrong.

If Mr. Lamb was most entirely perfect in the eyes of his friends and associates, it was due solely to his profound disregard of the finer shades of class distinction, his complete indifference as to what was taking place about him in his sacrosanct community. He should have been a civil leader, the chairman of committees, the protector of the established order

of things, whereas he devoted most of his time to making a fine art of comfortable if grotesque sitting. This state of affairs, to put it mildly, was most distasteful to Mrs. Lamb. Consequently Lamb enjoyed it the more. Silently, some might say meanly, he observed her irritation. He studied it analytically. He also enjoyed her dizzy attempts to make up in herself for the semi-recumbency of her husband.

Once when Lamb had elevated himself in an endeavor to rid the community of Home Defense lecturers, reformers, and other practitioners of a warped and questionable patriotism, his wife had been so outraged that she had withdrawn to Europe for the duration of three months, much to the peace and gaiety of the entire household. Lamb and Hebe often alluded half despondently to the unguarded naturalness of existence during that pleasant period.

Hebe drove. She drove a winding way along a picturesque, semi-rustic road leading to that desirable eminence from which the abode of Lamb looked down on both sides of the tracks through casements that had framed several generations of watchers, for the ancestral Lambs had always been estate-minded and land-possessed.

Mrs. Lamb objected to the antiquity of the house, but she had to admit the distinction of its location and the advantages of its ample grounds. She had endeavored to make Lamb build. Lamb had studied her darkly for the full space of a minute, and there the endeavor had languished, never to be renewed. He had merely grinned, elevated his knees a trifle higher, and sighted at her over them. That had been quite enough. The subject was definitely closed.

As the car rounded a well-planned curve such as is to be found on the right side of the tracks, Hebe's eyes marked and dwelt on a figure she considered rather unusual. It was a little russet man, as she always afterwards remembered him. A small creature, this person was, appareled in an ancient habit of russet hue. Even the umbrella which he carried with some show of elaboration was of the same color. From the rear, his short plump figure gave one the impression of good living and well being. It was a jolly sort of figure, the embodiment of

jocund autumn. Hebe thought of chestnuts and burning leaves, of trees turning and hearths aglow. He was a surprising little man, well poised and suggesting a certain dignity in spite of his odd appearance.

The little man was more surprising still as the car drew near him, for he suddenly stopped, turned deliberately in his tracks and brandished his russet umbrella in a most determined and imperative manner. There was no mistaking the meaning. He desired the car to stop. And Hebe obediently stopped. She noticed the little man's face was also of a russet hue. It was a jolly face, in which sparkled a pair of merry, unfathomable eyes.

"May I try it?" he asked abruptly.

His voice was as clear as a bell. It carried a quality of humorous briskness. Hebe was nonplused.

"You mean—" she began.

"Exactly, my dear," supplied the little russet man as he fidgeted ineffectually with the handle of the rear door. "I mean just what I said: may I try it?"

"Let me help you," offered Mr. Lamb, slightly dazed, as he turned to open the door from the inside. In doing so his eyes encountered those of the little man, and an extraordinary sensation shot through him. He felt as if suddenly he had been discovered, and yet there was a haunting sense of having just failed to remember something he had forgotten so long ago that he doubted ever having known it. The spell was broken at the sound of the little man's clear voice.

"Your servant, sir," he said, and there seemed to be some hidden significance to his words. "Now I suppose one mounts?"

"Just so," replied Mr. Lamb. "One mounts."

After busily podging himself into the automobile, the little man sat down quite unhurriedly and arranged his umbrella in just a certain way. It was his way of arranging an umbrella.

"Now," he said, looking about him cheerfully, "what happens next? Make it do things, my dear."

Feeling much younger and less assured, Hebe put the car

in motion as the little man observed her, his eyes alight with great expectations.

"You must understand," he explained in a confidential voice, leaning over to Mr. Lamb, "in my other—er—I mean, in my younger days I had no experience at all with this method of locomotion. How could I?" he demanded severely. "How could I?"

The question required an answer.

"You just couldn't," agreed Mr. Lamb. "Impossible."

"Exactly!" cried the little russet man on a note of triumph. "The method didn't exist. Is it—er—er—quite as you would have it, my dear sir?"

"Not so good," offered Lamb, not knowing himself exactly how he would have it.

"No," reflected his small passenger judicially. "It is, as you so laconically put it, not so good."

"Some nerve," remarked Hebe in a smothered voice.

"The expression, my dear, is modern," said the little man good-humoredly, "yet its meaning is quite clear. I was merely agreeing with your father, for I presume he is your father, but perhaps I am in error on that slight point. It's possible you are his wife, or even better, his mistress. It is of no importance. As I was just now saying, I prefer to walk. I seem to taste things through the soles of my feet."

"You must run across some rare dishes," Hebe threw back jauntily.

The little man eyed the girl with approval.

"Your daughter, sir," he said, "for now I am sure she is your daughter, appears to possess an unusually healthy strain of vulgarity. I like it. I myself am vulgar beyond compare. In my other—er—I mean to say, in my younger days even strong men were forced to leave the room. I once remember Rabelais's fainting—the master vulgarian of them all. That was an achievement. My highest. Now I am somewhat refined. Not that I fail to appreciate things."

Mr. Lamb did some vague casting back in his memory, then became slightly shocked. This strange passenger must indeed be extremely old, almost too old to exist at all.

"Did I understand you to say, Rabelais?" he asked in his most polished manner.

"A thousand pardons," the little russet man hastened to explain. "Rabelais! Certainly not. It must have been a more recent vulgarian. Old fellows like myself are prone to confuse both people and periods. Many years ago, though, I once met you, Mr. Lamb."

"Me," ejaculated Lamb, now thoroughly aroused. "At what time? In what place may I ask?"

"Before you were, in a loose manner of speaking, born," came the quiet reply. "The place does not matter. You would not recall it."

Lamb and his daughter swiftly sought each other's eyes and found therein no helpful revelation. They seemed to be driving on in a dim, wandering silence, almost somnolent.

"From the outset you were destined to conflict," drifted a small, clear, yet distant voice from the rear seat. "It can be rectified. It should be. If I can be of any service—"

Silence. Hebe was driving as those who drive in a dream—automatically, instinctively. Her father seemed to have fallen into some deep quagmire of meditation from which he would probably never be able to extricate himself. Silence still. Higher mounted the road. Had they been driving thus through eternity? Where was the station? Where was the house? And what, exactly, did they matter? Absently Hebe began to sing softly a melody from Tosca. Her low voice was surprisingly sweet, yet for some inexplicable reason an echo voice seemed to be following her today, a stronger voice filled with passion and bitterness, a knowledge and love of life. Lamb kept passing from one brown study to another, each growing browner until the last one threatened to become black. Yet even in his aloofness he listened to the singing and wondered. Something within him responded to it. As Hebe quite naturally slowed down and stopped at the gates to the house before taking the car to another entrance, a clear note rang out and lingered for a moment in the car around them—only them. They started and gazed at each other with bewildered eyes.

"Give over whooping," said Lamb. "What will our passenger think, not to mention the entire neighborhood?"

Hebe glanced back at the rear seat.

"He doesn't seem to be there," she announced unsurely.

"Where the devil did we put the beggar off?" demanded her father.

"Don't know. He's off. That's just all there is to it," replied Hebe. "Perhaps the lunatic slipped out when we slowed down somewhere. I think he is an escaped one—honestly."

"Without the slightest possibility of a doubt," agreed Mr. Lamb. "But do you remember, the devil knew my name?"

"Yes—yes—so he did," said Hebe. "I remember now. Rum, ain't it?"

"No end," replied Lamb with a grin. "This is our show, Hebe, understand?"

"It is. It is," said the girl.

And just as he was leaving the car he asked her as diffidently as he could, "Listen, Heb, does your friend—what's her name —Sand—"

"Sandra Rush," supplied Hebe helpfully.

"Name doesn't matter anyway," went on her father hurriedly. "Does she always act like that?"

"That's for you to find out," said Hebe.

"Certainly not. No interest," declared Mr. Lamb. "And is it true that she parades in underwear?"

"That's a fact," the girl replied. "An absolute fact. I'll take you to see her sometime."

"God forbid," muttered Lamb, turning up the extensive driveway. "I wash my hands of it all."

Chapter V. A Horse in Bed

MR. LAMB RETURNED HOME TO FIND HIS WIFE IN ANOTHER man's arms. The scene would have annoyed if not irritated the majority of God-fearing husbands. Not so Mr. Lamb. It left him cold. To heighten the color of the situation, Mrs. Lamb

was clad in what is generally considered an intimate costume —arrangements usually associated with the bed, yet not necessarily with sleep. The costume in which the man rejoiced seemed a bit vague to Lamb. All he could think of was Mardi-grass, class reunion, and revelry in general. He was not particularly interested.

The couple lay à la Cupid and Psyche upon the floor. At Lamb's entrance Cupid released Psyche with such alacrity that there was the unromantic sound of a thud, Psyche being in the neighborhood of ten stone.

"Ah!" cried Mr. Leonard Gray with a wild wave of his hand and a smile of an uncertain nature. "Crœsus home from his mints. How stands the market today?"

Mr. Lamb saw no occasion to reply to this piece of flamboyancy.

"Well, old money-grubber," said Mrs. Lamb, heaving into a more graceful position, "I suppose your hands reek with greenbacks. You're late tonight."

Nor to this remark did Mr. Lamb consider it essential to reply. He merely contemplated the pair at leisure.

"There are lounges," he said at last. "It's merely a suggestion, of course."

"Oh, no, the floor's the place," protested Mr. Gray.

"Not the way I was taught," said Mr. Lamb. "Tilly, where'd you get those funny breeches?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Lawrence," Mrs. Lamb replied with an attempt at dignity. "They're not breeches. They're—"

"Go on, tell me they're kilts," interrupted her husband. "I'm ignorant. I revel in it.'

"You know perfectly well they're your own best silk pajamas," retorted his wife. "I put them on to get a certain effect."

"You'll get a tremendous effect unless you've put them on backwards," Mr. Lamb observed. "I've always had to be careful with those pajamas myself."

"Sapho," put in Mr. Gray hastily, "I don't think I can go on with it now. I can't recapture the mood."

"Try that strangle hold again, young man," suggested Mr. Lamb. "It might do you a world of good."

"Every man must play his part, Mr. Lamb," replied Leonard Gray protestingly.

"But you appear to be playing my part," said Lamb. "Playing it better than I could—far better."

Mr. Gray was the local amateur hero, the focal point of the Woodbine Players. He had once tried to sell bonds in Mr. Lamb's office. It had been a poor try. Even his manly good looks had failed to disturb the stenographers. So, accordingly, he had withdrawn, having failed in all departments. The flappers and married women who had nothing better to do welcomed him back to the fold of the idle, and found him quite a help. Of late he was much to be seen at the Lamb ménage where Sapho and he developed their art.

"Why persist in misunderstanding?" complained Mrs. Lamb. "Leonard and I are rehearsing for Sunday night."

"Then I suppose I should stay away or visit friends?" her husband suggested.

"Don't be vulgar," Mrs. Lamb replied. "You know very well about the Vacation Fund affair."

"When I was a boy," said Mr. Lamb, "such scenes used to be barred in public, especially on Sunday. Why do they close the movies?"

At this point Hebe blew into the room and eyed the weirdly clad couple.

"At it again, I see," she announced. "When will you two ever get tired?"

Mrs. Lamb sighed wearily and considered rising, then thought better of it.

"I'm sure I'll be glad when it's all over," she said. "I'm tired out, and the part bores me to tears."

"I wish I could take it for you," Hebe's voice was deep with unfelt sympathy.

"Child," said her mother, "you'd never understand. It takes —oh, I don't know what it takes."

"It takes a hell of a lot of nerve, I'd say," Mr. Lamb re-

marked. "Come on, Hebe, I want to desiphon a couple of drinks."

When they had left the room Mrs. Lamb looked questioningly at her partner.

"You shouldn't have dropped me like that," she complained. "I felt so off poise."

"Only thing to do under the circumstances," replied Mr. Gray.

"Perhaps it was," she answered as he helped her to her feet. Then in a lower voice, "I'm afraid we were rehearsing too well, Len. You'll have to be a better boy."

"More careful," he said, equally low.

She nodded.

In the dining-room Lamb was actively caging drinks, being carefully provided for by Thomas and Hebe. Thomas knew Lamb better than Lamb knew himself. He had been in the family longer and was so old that he had grown used to it and was now apparently indifferent to the passage of time. Thomas seemed to feel that he had got so old he could hardly get any older. He had no more room for years. So he cheerfully kept on living and regarding Lamb and Hebe as his last responsibilities. He was far too old for Mrs. Lamb. She was eager to pension him off. Thomas knew this and failed to show the proper amount of gratitude.

Presently Brother Dug came in—Douglas Blumby, Lamb's brother-in-law and pet aversion. Dug always sang the "dead drunk" part in "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean," and had never failed to find it amusing. He was about Lamb's own age, forty, and should have been chloroformed some months before his first candle. During the war he had been a camp song-leader and general rouser-up, and ever since that time his one idea in life had been to make people sing. On gala occasions he donned his non-combatant song-leader's uniform and recalled camp life in a loud voice. He did things about Boy Scouts, and they failed to see his point.

Now he entered the room with a, "Whoopee, good people! Guzzle's the word. How's tricks, Larry?"

Larry choked so severely over his drink that both Thomas

and Hebe sped to his assistance, the one taking the glass from his shaking hand, the other thumping him violently upon the back. When the afflicted man had somewhat recovered he turned a pair of watery malevolent eyes on his brother-in-law.

"I'm not proud of Lawrence," he said in a hoarse voice, "but by God if I'll stand for Larry! Furthermore I don't know any tricks."

Hebe turned to brother Dug reproachfully.

"You've been cautioned enough not to call him Larry," she told him.

Brother Dug was not at all cast down.

"All right, Larry," he replied with a humorous smirk as he patted Mr. Lamb's already flayed back. "I'll not call you Larry."

Thomas and Hebe seized Mr. Lamb's arms and clung to them. For a moment he stood there rigid and straining like a statue of Prometheus chained, then he allowed himself to be placed in a chair and supplied with a fresh high-ball.

Meanwhile Douglas Blumby had drifted away on some merry quest. His booming voice could be heard in the hallway discussing with Gray and Sapho the part that he would play in the Vacation Fund affair.

"Why do you let him live here, father?" asked Hebe.

"God knows, young one," he replied. "Perhaps it's fear of your mother or my final loyalty to her. Another thing, I have a certain duty to society. Bad as I am I could never inflict that ninny on the world. We must keep our troubles in the family."

It was hardly a propitious moment for the entrance of Mr. Melville Long, yet in that young gentleman came without a care in the world, assured of a warm, if not enthusiastic, reception. Mr. Lamb, gazing at him with lowering brows, recognized the youth he had so disastrously attempted to imitate.

"This is Mel Long," said Hebe. "He wolfs with us tonight, major."

"I know your father," said Lamb, extending a limp hand. "He works."

"A father's privilege," replied Mr. Long blithely. "I often

thank God he does. If he didn't I don't know how we'd ever get along."

"You rejoice in your non-productiveness, young man," observed Lamb.

"I'm not so unproductive," the youth replied. "This morning I helped a famous dipsomaniac to regain a part of his health by playing him eighteen holes of golf. This afternoon I made a sketch of mother that made the old dear feel fifteen years younger. I'll get a new car for that. And tonight—well, here I am."

"And I suppose you're going to stay," said Mr. Lamb rather cheerlessly.

"Until the crack o' dawn," Long replied with a happy smile. "Golfing makes one hungry."

Mr. Lamb rose wearily from his chair, placed his half-empty glass on the buffet and walked to the door.

"Well," he said, "if you've settled that, I suppose nothing I can say would induce you to alter your plans. At your age I didn't drink—much." He turned to his daughter and continued: "Hebe you do the strangest things. Don't drop the decanter when pouring. And don't wear it out."

With that he left the room. After dinner he retired to his study, where he sat doing nothing, absolutely nothing. Once he walked out on his little private veranda and considered the world at large, after which he returned to his chair where he continued to do nothing.

The next day he broke an inflexible rule and journeyed to the city. It was Saturday. There was no sense to it, yet he went just the same.

As he made for a seat in the train, a slim figure almost tripped him up in its eagerness to crowd past him.

"We shall sit together," breathed the figure. "You and I on a single seat—alone!"

"With the exception of five or six hundred human souls," observed Mr. Lamb, "we are quite alone."

"This is merely the beginning," replied Sandra.

"It is a short trip and I usually read right up to the end of it. That has been my rule for years," said Lamb.

"But now that you've come to know me so well," the young lady continued, "you will have to make a new set of rules."

Mr. Lamb regarded her with a pained expression.

"You get the queerest ideas in your head," he replied. "I hardly know you at all. Why don't you go up there and sit with Simonds? He has no one to talk with, and I doubt if he knows how to read."

"Mr. Simonds!" exclaimed Sandra. "He is a lovely man. He lends me his horse. I ride him tomorrow."

"Why don't you go and tell him about it?" said Lamb curtly. "If I couldn't be a better horse than that clown of his I'd give up trying. At that he's preferable to his master."

"You like him, I see," said Sandra.

"We all do," replied Lamb shortly; then with a quick change of tone, "Tell me, do you really parade in underwear?"

"You mean, march down Fifth Avenue behind a band and Mr. Whalen?" she asked. "Never! I'm too exclusive."

"I didn't mean quite so openly as that," Mr. Lamb explained. "You know what I mean. Don't quibble."

"I have never quibbled," she said with conviction, "and I don't think it nice of you to suggest such a thing. But I do parade in underwear, to say the least."

"I wouldn't put it that way," advised Mr. Lamb, in a fatherly voice. "It doesn't sound nice."

"Oh, I am still unseduced," she replied. "I'm tired of trying to be."

Mr. Lamb looked about him quickly, consternation in his eyes.

"Lay off that," he said in a low, intense voice. "Don't shout the word above the roar and clatter of the train. Confine your unsolicited confessions to this end of the car."

"You misunderstand," she continued earnestly. "I don't mean that I desire to be seduced. What I tried to convey to you is, I'm tired of having people try to seduce me. You're an exception."

"Let's drop seduction for the moment," pleaded Mr. Lamb. "Do you like going to plays?"

"Only for the moment will I drop it," said Sandra. "I like going to plays. Take me."

"I will not," said Lamb.

"Dog," said Sandra, and turned to the window.

The conversation languished here. Mr. Lamb opened his paper and endeavored to read. His eyes kept straying furtively to the girl's averted face. Had she caught his glance he would have felt like a thief. The reason was hard to define. Gradually it dawned on him that the girl was looking at the scenery. Actually looking at it. Seeing it. To such an extent, in fact, that he was entirely forgotten. She had dismissed him from her thoughts, if he ever had been in her thoughts. She was out there somewhere, out there in the woods and fields. She was no longer connected with underwear, that is, Lamb hastily amended, she was no longer parading in underwear with commercial intent. Lamb also amended that thought. He did not know quite how to put it, so he gave it up. Anyway she was out there somewhere, and he was left quite behind. He felt injured yet interested.

Suddenly she squeezed his arm.

"Look!" she said. "See the two ponds—the upper one and the lower?"

The ponds flashed past, two brief little bits of metal. She looked at him with cloudy eyes.

"Well, the lower pond is all alone now," she continued. "There used to be swans on it. Such lovely, button-hook-looking swans. Now they're all gone. They're on the upper pond, those swans, and the children play there now. Do you think that the lower pond feels lonely?"

Mr. Lamb considered it a very difficult question. His common sense assured him that the lower pond did not mind in the least, yet somehow, within himself, he felt as did his companion, that the lower pond might feel a little lonely.

"Yes," he said at last, regarding her quite seriously. "I think the chances are that the lower pond feels just a bit out of things. Perhaps it is lying there wondering when the swans will return again . . . and the children."

"I think you're awfully damn nice," she said irrelevantly, and Lamb promptly returned to his paper.

Just before the train pulled in at the station, Lamb turned to her and asked, "Why do you sometimes speak in such a strange way . . . sort of inverted English?"

"You don't like it?" she asked with a delightfully rising inflection.

"Leave me out of it," he replied. "Why do you do it?"

Then she laughed. She laughed softly, almost inwardly, without regard for either Lamb or his feelings.

"You're so dumb," she said finally when she had pulled herself together. "But just because you've given me such a good time, I'll let you into a secret. Where I work, where I wander around in underwear, the directing gods urge us to talk like that. They think it sounds distinguished, gives the scanty things we wear the stamp of authenticity. Some of the models are much worse than I am. Sometimes I fall into it from sheer habit, at others for the sake of practice. I love to practice on you, you're so—so—gullible, if you get what I mean. Now will you make me much?"

Lamb gave general directions as to just where she could go, and thus they parted, the one to the opulent salons of Fifth Avenue, the other to the thronging defiles of the financial district.

That night Lamb momentarily left his study and stood for a while on his private veranda. In a perverse fashion he was a little nosey about what was going to happen on the following evening and the preparations now under way. Merely because he was so completely out of it. Lamb was that way.

Mrs. Lamb—Sapho—with several turbans around her head, and what he decided must be a romper suit embellished with a scarf round the waist, was temperamentally directing several members of the Woodbine Players in the erecting of floodlights and the construction of a stage. At times she would pause as if in a trance, one hand pressed to her cheek. And Lamb hated that. He had to look somewhere else whenever she did it. Sapho was also driving Thomas into a long awaiting grave by sending him for something, then not wanting it when

the old man had pantingly arrived. Lamb called Thomas to him, and ordered him to bed.

"On your way through the dining-room don't forget to tilt the decanter," he told him.

"I wasn't going to, sir," Thomas assured him, and shambled off with a parting, "I hope we all sleep, sir, in spite of it."

Lamb hoped so. He intended to.

He returned to his study and the charming fabrications of Kai Lung and was getting along quite nicely when he became aware that someone was speaking to him. What he heard was:

"As I was saying, it should be rectified."

Mr. Lamb looked up and saw sitting opposite him, as if he had always been accustomed to occupying that particular chair, the little russet man.

"Can you do anything about it?" asked Mr. Lamb.

"I did not say that I could, sir," the little man replied.

"Then why let's talk about it?" continued Lamb. "From the first, you say, I was destined to conflict. By that, I assume you meant, spiritual conflict. Well, recently I've just realized it. Before that I always imagined I was a singularly contented and fortunate man. I'm not. I don't like things."

"What would you prefer to be?" asked the plump caller, carefully placing his umbrella on the floor beside his chair. "What would you like to do?"

Lamb rose in exasperation. He moved restlessly about the study, poured out a brace of drinks, produced a box of cigars, and finally reseated himself.

"I don't know," he said rather helplessly. "Haven't the vaguest idea when you put it to me straight. One thing I do know, I'm tired of being a human being. I think I'd like to be things if I could—animals, birds, beasts, fish, any old sort of a thing, just to get another point of view, to keep from thinking and acting always as a man, always as a civilized being, an economic unit with a barrel full of obligations constantly threatening to run up against something and smash."

The little russet man considered Lamb pensively for a short time over the ash rim of his cigar. Lamb steadily meeting his gaze read a world of understanding in the little fellow's eyes.

To Lamb at that moment he did not seem little. He seemed large enough almost to be terrible. Yet the man was not quite terrible. It was his penetration that gave one a feeling of awe —of nakedness.

"That is all I wanted to know," said the little russet man emphatically, and put down his glass.

Lamb turned to reach for an extra ash tray. When he turned back with the tray, offering it to his guest, all that remained of him was a lazily floating cloud of cigar smoke. The cigar itself was neatly balanced on the arm of the chair. Only the glass, cigar, and weaving smoke gave evidence that he had ever been there at all.

For several seconds Lamb remained in a condition of suspended animation, the ash tray still extended. Then he deliberately returned the tray to its place, finished his drink, put his book on the desk, its pages spread at the place where he had been reading, got up from his chair and thoughtfully left the room.

It was Hebe's custom to call her father in the morning. Even in the summer-time when most young ladies lay late abed, especially on Sundays, Hebe was always hellishly up and prowling.

Mr. and Mrs. Lamb occupied adjoining rooms though the advantage therein had for some time ceased to exist. It was through her mother's room that Hebe gained access to her father's.

This morning as usual, she appeared in a flaming dressing-gown and softly opened her father's door. Sapho was still asleep, her temperament entirely abandoned. The girl looked into her father's room gloatingly. She was going to disturb someone. Then gradually her expression changed. She cocked her head on one side like a puzzled dog and continued to look, her eyes growing rounder and rounder. At last she turned quietly to her mother's bed.

"Sapho!" she whispered. "Sapho! Wake up. There appears to be a horse in father's bed."

Chapter VI. Equine Excursions

THERE WAS AN ELEMENT OF URGENCY SHARPENING THE EDGES of Hebe's whisper that penetrated Sapho's vast unresponsiveness to mundane considerations. This woman of many parts and poses sat up in bed and looked upon her daughter as a glacier would regard a rose.

"Your humor, Hebe, is extremely mal à propos," she brought forth.

"Sapho," replied Hebe, "I'm not trying to be funny. Things are funny enough. There's a horse or something very much like a horse in the major's bed."

Sapho still light-headed from a heavy sleep strove to adjust her brain to the reception of this extraordinary announcement. No good. The brain refused to accept it. "What do you mean, there's a horse in your father's bed?" she achieved after an effort.

"Exactly that," answered her daughter calmly. "Either father has turned into a horse or a horse has turned into father. It comes to the same thing. There's one other possibility. Some horse might have run father out of bed and taken his place or else gone to sleep on top of him."

"As if we didn't have enough on our hands with the Vacation Fund affair tonight," Mrs. Lamb complained as she sought for her robe and slippers. "If it isn't a horse, Hebe, I'll be very much vexed."

"And if it is?" Hebe inquired.

"God knows," sighed Mrs. Lamb, tiptoeing across the room.

Together they looked upon Mr. Lamb's bed and beheld a horse. As much of the covers as possible were over this horse, its head was upon the pillows, yet much remained exposed and dangling. Hoofs and legs were eloquently visible. It was obvious that only the most determined of horses would have

been willing to sleep in such a cramped position merely for the sake of a bed.

"My God," breathed Mrs. Lamb. "What will the servants say?"

Under the scrutiny of the two women the horse stirred uneasily and opened one eye. It was enough. Mrs. Lamb indulged in a gasp. Hebe was merely interested. Not satisfied with this demonstration, the horse raised his head from the pillows and looked inquiringly at Hebe and Mrs. Lamb. Then his lips curled back in a sardonic grin displaying a powerful set of vicious-looking teeth. He rolled his eyes until only the whites remained and thrust one curved foreleg at Mrs. Lamb, a gesture eloquently suggestive of his intention to inflict some painful injury upon her body and person. Mrs. Lamb hastily withdrew to her bed where she took refuge beneath the covers.

"You do something about it, Hebe," came her muffled voice. "Get the creature out of the house without the servants knowing. It would never do to have them think your mother had a horse in the next room. You know what servants are."

The horse was listening intently, ears pitched forward, and at this last remark he winked slowly and deliberately at Hebe. The girl was amazed. It was her father all over. At that moment she accepted the fact that something strange had occurred.

Then after a few minutes of thoughtful consideration, looking this way and that as if to determine the best way of procedure, Mr. Lamb cautiously got himself out of bed, but not without considerable clattering and convolutions. Hebe watched him with amused interest. She knew it was her father.

"Hurry, Hebe," came her mother's voice. "We can't afford to miss church today—not with that affair on tonight."

Mr. Lamb thought of his best pajamas, and throwing back his head gave vent to a wild neigh. He was feeling rather wild and at the same time a trifle timid. He had often played horses as a child, but never actually been one. Now he tried to recall just how he had gone about it in those early days. He wondered how he looked, what sort of horse he was, and, remem-

bering his full-length mirror, he stepped delicately across the room and, sitting down in a strangely unhorselike attitude, lowered his neck and gazed at his reflection. The effect was not pleasing. He saw a most despondent-looking creature regarding him from the glass. Hebe could not restrain a laugh, and Mr. Lamb turned his head and looked at her reproachfully, then continued his scrutiny.

"I'm not much of a horse in this position," he decided. "There must be some other way of being a horse. Perhaps—"

He rose from his strange position and backed away from the mirror, but was still unable to get the desired view. Bending an eloquent glance upon his daughter, he pointed with his hoof to the mirror. Obediently the girl went over to the mirror and after much shaking and nodding of her father's head, she adjusted it to his satisfaction.

"That's something like," thought Lamb, surveying his reflection with no little satisfaction.

He was a fine body of a horse—a sleek, strapping stallion. Black as night with a star on his forehead. He turned slowly, taking himself in from all angles.

"Rather indecent, though," he thought. "Wish I had a blanket, a long one. Oh, hell! I'm a horse, now. Horses don't mind. Still it doesn't seem quite—well, I just never did it before, that's all." He paused to reconsider his reflection, then continued his soliloquy, "Anyway, if that girl can go about in step-ins and such, I can go about in nothing at all."

He looked at his daughter proudly, and affectionately nuzzled her warm neck. She put up her arms and kissed him, then drew back and looked at him with a half-smile. Lamb solemnly nodded his head, and Hebe understood. Then a pleasant idea occurred to him. He squeezed through the door into his wife's room and quietly approached the bed. Mrs. Lamb was still completely smothered by the covers. Slipping his nose through an aperture, he suddenly emitted a piercing scream sounding like a lost soul in hell. It was as if he had blown the good lady out of the bed. With amazing swiftness covers and all disappeared. Mrs. Lamb found herself on the

floor on the other side of the bed, and she felt herself lucky to be there.

"Hebe, dear, for God's sake, what was that?" she wailed.

"The horse," answered Hebe shortly.

"Oh, what a horse!" quavered Mrs. Lamb. She was almost crying. "Can't you get him to go away? There's some Quaker Oats in the kitchen. Perhaps you can lure him out."

Thoroughly satisfied with the results of his first endeavor, Lamb's thoughts automatically turned to his brother-in-law. His spirit of enterprise was fired. He would stir farther afield. Still walking with high-bred softness, he made his way to the quarters of Douglas Blumby. Hebe expectantly opened the door for him, and Lamb, with a courteous inclination of the head, passed through.

Brother Dug was at his shower. He was attacking it as only Brother Dug could. He was literally singing it into silence. Lamb stopped and considered, then gently parted the curtains and thrust in his head. Brother Dug, feeling a draft, reached blindly behind him to reclose the parted curtains. His hands encountered the wet nose of a horse. For a moment he fingered the nose thoughtfully. It was not a part of himself, he was sure of that. Then Lamb breathed heavily on his back, and Brother Dug gave up feeling and singing at the same moment. He turned uncertainly only to find a horse confronting him with every evil intent in its eyes.

Mr. Blumby's power lay in his throat, and this organ he now hastened to use with unprecedented vigor. It was a triumph of vocalization. He put his whole heart and soul into it, yet the horse remained. Realizing he could not shout the horse out of existence, Blumby crouched against the wall and held up two shaking hands as if to blot out the horrifying sight. For a moment he thought himself back in bed in the grip of some vividly terrifying nightmare. The horse still remained, water running grotesquely down either side of his nose. Mr. Lamb was killing two birls with one stone—refreshing himself and taking vengeance on his brother-in-law with whom he had never thought he would share a shower. He recalled the weeks, months, years of nausea this creature had caused him by his

mere existence, and his anger rose. With one alarming foreleg he reached out and pressed down on the hot water lever. Cries of increased anguish from the occupant of the shower. Steam arose. Douglas attempted to escape, but Mr. Lamb implacably pushed him back. By this time Hebe had retired, having no desire to take part in a murder, no matter how justifiable.

Tiring at last of this sport, Mr. Lamb turned from the shower and devoted his talents to the room. This he proceeded to wreck, and, remarking Hebe's absence, gave other effective demonstrations of his scorn.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have done that," he said to himself as he left the room, "but after all I'm a horse; I'm not supposed to know any better."

Hebe met him at the door and suggested a breath of fresh air. Lamb gravely agreed. He was rather nervous and faltering in navigating the stairs, but with Hebe's moral encouragement he finally found himself in the lower hall. The girl opened the front doors and gave him an affectionate pat on the rump.

"That's rather a familiar thing to do even to one's father," Lamb decided.

He turned and subjected his daughter to a reproaching look, then with great dignity passed through the doors and descended the front steps. The Sunday papers had already been delivered. A headline caught his attention. He paused and endeavored to read, but found difficulty in focusing his eyes. Finally he hit upon the plan of using only one eye. This caused him to cock his head in rather an odd fashion for a horse. However, it served Lamb's purpose, and he became thoroughly interested. Having essentially a legal turn of mind, he had been following this murder trial in detail, and this report struck him as being unusually full and intelligent. With a deft hoof he flipped the paper over and continued reading, becoming more absorbed as he progressed.

Suddenly the maid, Helen, came out on the front veranda, hurried down the steps and snatched the paper from under his attentive nose. Lamb started after her up the steps, and the maid with a frightened cry darted into the house. Later she assured her mistress that she had been pursued across the lawn

by a wild horse with blazing eyes. Mrs. Lamb was not hard to convince. That horse was capable of anything she thought.

Deprived of his newspaper, Lamb took stock of the world and his altered relations to it. It was a fair world and a brave day. Lamb felt better than he had in years. Nevertheless, he would very much like to finish that newspaper story. Perhaps the Walkers had not risen yet. Maybe their paper would still be out. With this hope at heart, he cantered down the drive and along High Hill Road until he had reached the Walkers' place. Here he turned in and bore down on the front porch as unobtrusively as he could, taking into consideration the fact that he was a stallion of striking appearance obviously on the loose.

Good. The paper was there. Lamb quickly found the exact place in the evidence he had been reading when interrupted and went on with the story. When it came to its continuation on page eighteen Lamb was nearly stumped, but by the happy expedient of applying a long red tongue to the paper, he was able to turn it to the desired page. Just as he had achieved this triumph some inner sense caused him to look up. Walker, clad in a bathrobe, was following his movements with every sign of amazement.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Walker softly. Then he called out: "Come here May, if you want to see something funny—a horse reading the Sunday paper."

"Nonsense," said his wife, coming on to the porch and scanning the moist paper. "The poor fool's been trying to eat the paper, that's all. Such a beautiful horse, too. Wonder whose he is?"

"She called me a poor fool," said Lamb to himself, "and she's the biggest dunce in town. However, she has sense enough to see that I am beautiful. I am. Very."

He looked at her with arched brows, and Mrs. Walker was visibly impressed.

"He's an odd horse," she admitted. "Perhaps he was, in some strange way, interested in that paper."

Lamb made an approving noise.

Walker, having observed the horse's efforts, studied the

page thoughtfully. There was only one continuation on it.

"I'll try him," he said, and he began reading the evidence aloud.

Lamb, forgetting he was a horse, promptly sat down and listened. From time to time, as a telling point was made, he nodded his head, and every time he did this Mr. Walker became so moved that he could hardly continue reading. Mrs. Walker drew up a wicker chair and sat down. She too, became interested both in the horse and the evidence.

It was a strange Sunday morning scene: Mr. Walker comfortably seated on the top step reading diligently and a horse sitting in a weird position listening intently with ears cocked forward. Later when the Walkers attempted to tell the story at the Golf Club, they were jeered into rebellious silence.

Upon the completion of the story, Lamb arose and bowed courteously, so courteously in fact, that Walker in spite of himself, returned the bow with equal elaboration. Thereupon Mr. Lamb walked decently down the driveway and turned into High Hill Road.

"A good sort, Walker," thought Lamb. "I'll remember him if ever I get back to my former self. He believes in taking a chance."

Back on the Walker porch the man turned to his wife.

"Well, that's about the darndest horse I've ever seen," he said.

Chapter VII. The Battle of the Church

"AN EXCEPTIONALLY INTERESTING TRIAL," MUSED MR. LAMB AS he ambled along High Hill Road. "If they can only get someone to corroborate that ragpicker's story the prosecution is going to have tough sledding."

Other considerations occupied his attention. He remembered with a pang that the morning had been lamentably free from any suggestion of bacon and eggs. Few things worse could happen to Mr. Lamb.

"Horses," he continued musing, "seem to get through the

day pretty well on grass, but I won't eat grass. It would seem so desperate. What would Hebe think if I ever told her I had eaten grass?"

He looked contemplatively at a near-by tuft. They were about finishing breakfast at home now, well satisfied, gorged no doubt. Smelling agreeably of butter, they were preparing for church. Well, he would miss that in any event.

"That bit there doesn't look so bad," he thought, eying the tuft of grass with closer attention. "Suppose I try it just for fun?"

He glanced in either direction and approached the tuft.

"Well, here goes," he said to himself. "Might as well be a regular horse while I'm at it."

He nibbled the grass tentatively, throwing his head back the better to judge its taste.

"Not at all bad," he decided. "Not bad at all. Sort of like a rugged salad."

For the better part of an hour Mr. Lamb continued along the road fastidiously selecting choice patches of grass and experimenting with various combinations of weeds, clover, and wild flowers. Some he found palatable, others were hard to down. His appetite temporarily arranged for, Lamb bent his mind on other lines of activity. He was not like other horses, content to graze all day. Furthermore, he had come across a cow cropping grass, and this had rather damped his ardor. He had no intention at present of sharing breakfast with a cow. One had to draw the line somewhere. His thoughts involuntarily strayed to Sandra, and suddenly he remembered she had told him she was going riding today on Simonds's horse. She had also said some rather silly things about Simonds being a lovely man.

"I'll fix that horse," he muttered or attempted to mutter. "I'll make him rue this day."

With this edifying intention firmly fixed in his mind he cantered off in the direction of Simonds's home. He knew exactly where the horse passed most of its time—in a vacant lot directly back of Simonds's place. A high fence surrounded the lot, and behind this fence Simonds's horse was going about

its own business. Mr. Lamb studied the innocent animal with growing animosity. He was the kind of horse Mr. Lamb most detested, a smug, plump horse, exactly like his master.

"He would have a fence to protect him," thought Lamb. "The coward. But I'll settle his hash. Wonder if I can make it?"

He backed off for some distance, gathered his powerful muscles together and made a lunge at the fence, clearing it neatly. Once on the other side he suddenly changed his tactics. Instead of rushing at the horse and demolishing it as he had intended, he decided first to indulge in a little sport. He would be more subtle in his form of attack. He would confound this horse, terrify it within an inch of its life, put it out of commission for Sundays yet unborn.

Accordingly Mr. Lamb did things, things that no horse had ever done before or had ever thought of doing. He lowered his body close to the ground and curved his legs in a most unusual manner. Throwing his head to one side, he allowed his tongue to loll out of his mouth at one corner. With that careful attention to detail that marks the true artist, he flattened his ears and rolled his eyes more unpleasantly.

"Guess I look funny enough," thought Lamb. "Wish I could foam a bit. That would be the final touch."

He tried to work up a convincing-looking foam and succeeded partially. In this manner he approached his unwary enemy.

"Love to have a snapshot of myself," he reflected. "No one would ever believe it."

But several persons did believe it, among them being Simonds himself. He was standing at his bathroom window, and his eyes were starting out of their sockets. A few pedestrians also had stopped and now stood transfixed by the fence. This was more unusual than an appearance of Halley's comet, and years after they remembered the event far more vividly. Simonds, in a thin quivering voice, called to his wife, his son, and his daughter, and together in various stages of disarray, they witnessed the rout and almost total extinction of their horse.

When the horse first spied the strange-looking object creep-

ing up on him he stopped what he was doing and gave his full attention to it. At first he felt no fear. The phenomenon was entirely outside his experience. But as Lamb drew nearer a certain anxiety took the place of curiosity and surprise. And when the horse caught a glimpse of Mr. Lamb's lolling tongue and bloodshot eyes, he realized that here was something that would not improve upon closer acquaintance.

Slowly and deliberately Lamb circled round his enemy until he had reduced him to a state of abject terror. The horse's nerves were shot to pieces. He was trembling in every limb. Then Mr. Lamb, rolling his head drunkenly from side to side, his tongue sliding and slithering revoltingly between his bared teeth, began to close in on the aghast object of his enmity.

"A pretty picture I must make," thought Lamb, as he prepared for the final coup.

Within a few yards of the wretched horse, he paused and horrified the air with a series of heart-searing shrieks. The Simondses drew back from the window, the pedestrians hastily abandoned their points of vantage on the fence. The enemy almost swooned, but some half-numbed instinct warned him that to remain longer in the presence of that animal from hell was certain and painful death. Comparative safety lay only in flight, and flee the horse did. Thrice round the lot he sped, fear increasing his ambition to break all established speed records. Lamb, now at full height, followed just closely enough to keep the edge on the horse's terror.

On the third lap the horse decided that the enclosure was altogether too small to accommodate both of them. He made a dash at the fence. This time Lamb was not forced to jump, the enemy having gone clear through the fence and cleared the way. Out into the streets of the town the chase debouched. Fairfield Avenue swam past Mr. Lamb's vision like a dream. They came to a beautifully kept lawn and tore across it. The enemy rounded the corner of the house and came suddenly upon a breakfast party on the rear lawn. It was either his life, or the party's comfort, decided the horse. The party had to be sacrificed. Too late for turning now. Through the breakfast party the panting animal plowed, scattering table

and dishes to the four winds. Lamb noticed as he passed through that one of the ladies had lost her kimono and was rushing about with the table-cloth over her head. He knew the people but had no time to apologize. His interest in the scene had caused him to lose slightly, and he now redoubled his efforts. The ground fairly thundered beneath his hoofs as he dashed down the broad, quiet street at the end of which was situated the stately church he attended. This place of worship had broad doors on either side and a huge main entrance. They were all open to the breezes on this balmy July morning.

The fleeing horse, either mistaking the church for a stable or else deciding as a last resort to seek sanctuary, disappeared into the main entrance, paused in bewilderment, then as if realizing that this was no place for him, made a swift exit through one of the side doors.

Lamb in the heat of the pursuit followed without considering. He found the congregation in a state of wild confusion that was in no wise lessened by the sudden and tremendous appearance of a second and even more terrible horse. Protected by his pulpit the preacher looked boldly down upon his seething flock and for some odd reason began to sing "Nearer My God To Thee." Several women, believing he was summing up the situation altogether too mildly, fainted and lay in the aisles. All of the sleepers were wide awake and convinced that they would never sleep again.

It was at this moment that Lamb's better nature asserted itself. As he surveyed the scene of carnage he had been so instrumental in creating, his conscience smote him and he promptly sat down, hoping thereby to restore peace and harmony to the congregation.

Observing how quiet he was, one of the ushers timidly approached him and attempted to lead him out. Lamb resisted with dignity, and when the fellow persisted, he placed a hoof gently against his chest and gave him a slight push. The usher slid down the aisle as if it had been greased and brought up with a thump against a pew. No more attempts were made to expel Mr. Lamb. He remained quietly seated in the rear of the church, paying strict attention to his own affairs. True, he was

breathing hard, but so were many other members of the congregation including the preacher himself.

"This horse," announced the good man, peering at Mr. Lamb with puzzled eyes, "seems to be rather a different type of horse. I don't think he will disturb us and evidently he intends to stay. Who knows? Perhaps he is the first of equine converts."

Lamb's shoulders shook in encouraging mirth, and a polite noise issued from his throat. Several people turned and regarded him with timid reproval, and Lamb waved a placating hoof in their direction. Mistaking his meaning they immediately turned back and looked at him no more.

"Yes," continued the preacher as if in a dream, " a strangely odd horse. Never in my long experience—well, let's get on with the service."

Lamb followed the service closely, rising when the congregation rose and sitting when it sat. His kneeling was an artistic achievement and created such a stir that few people listened to the prayer in their efforts to observe his contortions. Even the preacher became distrait and found himself repeating toward the end of the prayer, "God, what a horse! God all mighty what a horse!"

When the plate was passed for the offering, Mr. Lamb involuntarily reached for his change. The gesture was eloquent but futile. He averted his gaze, hoping no one had noticed his slip.

At the close of the service he was the first one to leave the church and, as was his custom, he waited outside for his family. He had gone this far, he thought to himself, he might as well see the thing through. He little reckoned however, on his reception by Mrs. Lamb. The docility of the horse throughout the service, his obvious reverence and piety, had somewhat reassured this lady. She thought she knew how to deal with any person or creature who actually believed in God and took Him seriously. Consequently, as Lamb followed her and her daughter along the sidewalk, taking his proper place on the outside, she continually tried to "shoo" him, until Lamb in his exasperation gave vent to a piercing shriek.

That settled Mrs. Lamb. From then on Mr. Lamb was per-

force accepted as one of the party, much to Mrs. Lamb's humiliation. Time after time she passed acquaintances who in spite of their manners would not refrain from asking her what she was doing with a horse. Mrs. Lamb disclaimed any ownership of or responsibility for the animal. Lamb on his part invariably stepped courteously aside and gave the impression of following the conversation with polite attention. From time to time he nodded his head as if in agreement.

His wife particularly disliked this. It seemed to place her on a social level with a horse, and that was not to be tolerated. However, Lamb asserted his rights, and Mrs. Lamb no longer had the heart to challenge them. Hebe stuck to her father like a soldier, enjoying the situation with a maliciousness not at all compatible with her recent departure from a house of God. Toward the end of their progress the walk developed into a race, Mrs. Lamb endeavoring to leave the horse and Hebe behind, and the pair of them obstinately refusing to be left.

It was at this stage of the game that they encountered Sandra Rush. Mr. Lamb stopped in his tracks and fixed the girl with a triumphant eye. She met his gaze wonderingly for a moment, then turned to Hebe.

"Why, what a peculiar horse you have," she said. "For some reason he reminds me of your father. Something about the eyes. By the way, where is your father, the attenuated Lamb?"

Hebe was startled by her friend's instinctive recognition of the horse. Mrs. Lamb was returning reluctantly to join the conversation.

"I don't know exactly," she hastened to reply. "He's probably trailing about somewhere, or else just sitting. The major's an odd duck."

"A nice duck," said Sandra.

"What's this about ducks?" inquired Mrs. Lamb, as she joined the group in spite of the presence of the horse.

"I don't know," replied Sandra innocently. "I was just telling Hebe that I intended to go horseback riding this afternoon."

"On whose horse?" asked Hebe, and Mr. Lamb became immediately alert.

"That man Simonds's," said Sandra. "I ride on his horse each Sunday. Such a lovely horse."

"Well, he's far from a lovely horse now," replied Hebe sorrowfully. "From the glimpse I caught of him, that horse is a mental case. It will be many a long Sunday before he regains his reason, not to mention his health."

Sandra desired enlightenment, and Hebe told her all she had seen and heard of the chase. At the end of the stirring recital, Sandra turned and let her reproachful eyes dwell on Mr. Lamb. She found him looking noble and unrepentant, but under the pressure of her gaze, the great animal gradually wilted until finally his head hung low to the ground. Mrs. Lamb was outraged to see this demon stallion thus subjugated by this rather questionable friend of her daughter. As a matter of fact Mrs. Lamb resented Sandra's existence entirely. There were so many reasons—all of them good. Sandra was all that Mrs. Lamb would like to be and more than she had ever been.

"Why don't you ride this chap?" suggested Hebe. "It's all his fault."

"I shall," replied Sandra firmly. "I'll ride the devil to death. Simonds will lend me a saddle."

So, much to Mrs. Lamb's relief, the horse followed Sandra and was subsequently saddled and tethered in front of her house. When she came out from luncheon she found him leaning philosophically against a tree, his forelegs jauntily crossed.

"You'll have to cut this foolishness out," the girl said severely. "Only fake horses act like that. Don't make a spectacle of me."

Mr. Lamb turned an idle head and surveyed her long and approvingly. If she was as nice as that in riding togs, he considered, what wouldn't she be in underwear?

When Sandra had released the halter, he crouched close to the ground and peered round his shoulders at her. This proved a little too much for Sandra. The girl began to laugh, and Mr. Lamb shook himself impatiently. It was not the easiest position in the world to hold.

"I'll fix her," he said to himself.

When she finally decided to accept his grotesque invitation,

Mr. Lamb crawled hastily forward, and the girl found herself sitting on his rump. She sat there only a moment before she slid slowly but inevitably to the street. Lamb rose to his full height and looked down at the young lady.

"That," she said from the gutter, "was a peculiarly snide trick. I don't know what sort of a horse you are, but if you were a human being I fancy you'd pull chairs from beneath people."

Mr. Lamb executed a neat little dance step and waited. This time Sandra mounted him in the accepted manner, and Mr. Lamb immediately set off backward, looking round from time to time to take his bearings.

"If you have any gentlemanly instincts at all," said Sandra at last, "you'll give up all this shilly-shallying and do your stuff like an honest-to-God horse."

Her mind was in a state of confusion. She had ridden all her life and met all types and conditions of horses, but she had never encountered one that had behaved so incredibly as this one. In its very resourcefulness there was something almost human.

At the girl's plea Mr. Lamb reversed his position and went forward majestically through the town. Sandra felt as if she were leading a circus parade. When they reached a dirt road he abandoned his little conceits and settled down to real business. He carried her swiftly, smoothly, and effortlessly over the ground. He was experiencing a sense of freedom and power—a total lack of responsibility save for the safety of the girl on his back. Sandra had never felt so exhilarated. Her mount was self-conducted. She had hardly to touch the reins. Presently they came to a fence that bordered a long rolling meadow. Lamb slowed down and looked back inquiringly at his passenger.

"It's all right with me, old boy," said Sandra. "Can you make it?"

Lamb showed her he could. He landed on the other side of the fence as if he were equipped with shock-absorbers, then stretching his body he streamed away across the meadow. Sandra had a sensation of flying, and Lamb himself felt that

his hoofs were touching the ground only on rare occasions. After half an hour of swift running, Lamb came to a halt and sat down abruptly. The girl slid to the grass. When she attempted to rise, Lamb pushed her back with his nose and stood over her. For a moment she looked at the horse with startled eyes, then grinned.

"At it again," she said, pressing a cheek against his silky skin and giving him a small soft kiss.

Mr. Lamb stepped back a few paces and regarded the girl with heavy dignity. He was at a loss to know what to do about it. She had kissed him in broad daylight and made other affectionate advances. A stop should be put to this. Then something, some long restrained impulse seemed to snap in Mr. Lamb, and he began to prance joyously. He performed a dance of great vigor and elaboration after which he went racing round the meadow to give the girl some indication of what he could do when he set his mind to it. When he returned she was calmly reading a book she had fished from her pocket, "Green Mansions," and as Lamb, now adept at reading horsewise, followed several pages over her shoulder, he became absorbed in the narrative and placed a restraining hoof against the margin of the page to prevent her from turning over before he had caught up with her.

In this manner some time slipped by, the horse reading over the girl's shoulder, until at last growing tired of the heavy breathing in her ear, she pushed his nose away and laid aside the book. Thereupon Lamb dropped to the grass beside her and placed his head in her lap, opening one large eye and looking up at her owlishly. Sandra picked up the book and continued to read. Lamb nudged her, and she gave him a sharp slap. He nudged her again and she commenced to read aloud. Lamb settled down to listen. The situation was much to his liking.

An hour later when it was time to return home, the girl had to pummel him to get him to wake up. Still half asleep, he struggled to his feet and automatically reached for a cigarette, then remembering he was a horse, frowned thoughtfully upon his companion. It was all too bewildering Lamb decided, but it

had been an altogether satisfactory afternoon. Even while he had slept he had been deliciously aware of the closeness of the girl's body. Lamb was not insensitive to such things.

The stallion's appearance at the Vacation Fund affair that night was not an unqualified success. He first presented himself at the dining-room window where his wife and daughter and the leading actor, Mr. Leonard Gray, were indulging in a late, cold supper. Already the tables on the lawn were occupied. Other points of vantage were rapidly filling up. Cocktails were circulating freely. All those who dwelt on the right side of the tracks knew exactly the class of people for whom the Prohibition Act was intended. They themselves were certainly not meant to be included. That went without saying.

Mr. Lamb announced his presence by thrusting his head through the window and unloosing a piercing scream. The dining-room was filled with horror. . . . It took several minutes to find Mr. Gray, and several more to induce him to crawl from under the grand piano where he had apparently taken up permanent residence. Mrs. Lamb herself was none too well. When she and her leading man attempted to resume their dinner, their knives and forks clattered so violently against their plates, it sounded as if they were playing at beating the drum. The situation was saved by Hebe. That young lady of infinite composure, gathering up practically all the salad, made a quick exit through the window and led her father round behind some box bushes that encircled the field of activity. There was a convenient opening in the bushes at this spot through which, unobserved, Lamb could get an idea of what was going on.

Lamb thought the salad delicious. He had never tasted anything quite so whole-heartedly satisfying in his life. And when Hebe returned with a cocktail he felt that life was opening up indeed. A slight difficulty arose here, however. Lamb was unable to drink from so small a glass. He spilled most of its contents. His daughter with admirable resourcefulness thereupon fetched a bucket, a bottle of gin, some ice and oranges. While Mr. Lamb looked on approvingly, she mixed this mighty cocktail and placed it before him. Lamb speedily inserted

his nose, swallowed several cupfuls and sank back with a sigh.

"All set now?" asked Hebe.

Lamb nodded enthusiastically.

"When it's empty, I'll fill it up," she assured him. "Sprawl here and get an eyeful. I'll send Mel around with a tray of sandwiches. This affair is going to be a riot."

At the time she little realized the remarkable accuracy of her prognostication.

When Melville Long appeared with the sandwiches he found Mr. Lamb nose-down in the bucket, which from the sucking sounds that issued from it he judged to be empty. Mr. Lamb withdrew his head and received his visitor graciously. He literally beamed upon him, extending a hoof which Long seized and shook vigorously.

"A nice chap," thought Lamb. "One of the best. Wonder if he could mix me another cocktail? Every one else is having a good time."

With the aid of an eloquent nose he drew the young man's attention to the dispiriting state of the bucket. The youth was not long in catching Mr. Lamb's meaning. With a curt "We'll fix that," he hastened away. When he returned he was carrying two bottles of gin and an armful of oranges.

"Hebe's bringing the ice," he explained as he poured the gin in the bucket and rapidly squeezed the oranges. "Didn't have room myself."

Together the young people arranged Mr. Lamb satisfactorily, then left him to his own devices, their presence being required elsewhere. Mr. Lamb was feeling remarkably well-disposed. He thrust his head through the aperture and eyed the lawn. At the unexpected appearance of the head an elderly lady jumped with the agility of a girl.

"God bless me!" she cried, spilling her cocktail down her dress. "Did you see that, Helen?"

Helen, her daughter, fortunately had not seen. She regarded the hole in the bushes nervously. It was empty. Turning back to her trembling mother, she endeavored to sooth her, but the old lady had been profoundly shocked. Mr. Lamb did not like this old lady nor was he exceedingly fond of her daughter.

Arranging his face in its most demoniacal expression, he bided his time. When the two women were once more gazing nervously at the hole he suddenly popped his head through with instantaneous effect. Clinging to each other for support, mother and daughter cut a swath through the lawn party, uttering frightened little cries in their flight. Not until they were safely ensconced in their limousine and being driven rapidly home did they release their hold on each other. Then they sat up very erect and kept tapping their hands distractedly.

"I never saw such a face in my life. What was it?" asked the mother.

"Those eyes," intoned the daughter, and tightly closed her own.

Mr. Lamb's next opportunity to annoy someone came when a gentleman moved his chair close to the aperture and carelessly tossed his cigarette through it. The still lighted cigarette fell on Lamb's nose and burned it just a little. It was quite enough for Lamb. He promptly shot his head through the hole again and took a good look at the offender. Lamb did not like this man either. In his present state of liquor, Lamb hated the very sight of him. Therefore he withdrew his head and, thrusting a long leg through the hole, placed it against the chair and gave a tremendous shove. Man and chair parted company, but continued in the same general direction. The chair knocked the legs from under an innocent bystander, and its erstwhile occupant, passing completely through a group of ladies, came to rest on a rosebush. Extricating himself from this he hurried back to the hole and looked about for an enemy. None was to be found save an old gentleman quietly observing the colorful scene.

"Did you do that?" demanded the man in a hostile voice.

"Do what?" asked the old man amicably.

"Give me a clout just now," replied the other.

"Go away," said the old man deliberately. "You're drunk—drunker than you realize."

The assaulted man had reason to believe him, and quickly withdrew from the party. He did not feel quite drunk, but he

imagined he must be. Those cocktails. They were strange concoctions. Just the same someone had given him a clout. There was no denying that. Drunk or sober, he knew when he had received a clouting.

This supine activity, in spite of its pleasing results, began to pall on Mr. Lamb. He yearned for larger fields. Taking another swig at his monolithic cocktail, he rose and, finding a gate in the box bushes, mingled with the party on the lawn. Although a trifle unsteady, he managed to maintain his dignity. He conducted himself as he conceived a gentle and unobtrusive horse should. The guests were rather surprised, some even alarmed, but after a short time they accepted him as a part of the evening's entertainment. Mrs. Lamb was so advanced.

From afar Mr. Lamb observed two particularly pretty girls in intimate conversation. Approaching the girls quietly he nipped one of them in an extremely ungentlemanly manner. The girl gave a startled exclamation and, heedless of the onlooker, tenderly rubbed the injured spot. Then she turned and saw the horse looking at her roguishly.

"My dear," she said to her companion, "you should know what that horse just did. Why, the creature's almost human."

When Lamb next tried this unmannerly trick the afflicted lady gave the gentleman she was conversing with a resounding slap in the face and followed it up with a piece of her mind. The poor man looked thoroughly mystified and wretched. The husband of the lady hurried to the spot, and upon learning what had occurred, drew back mightily and knocked the man down. He was literally dragged out. Today he is still wondering why.

Sapho had more than a suspicion that all was not going well with her party. The Vacation Fund affair was threatening to become a shambles. It was all the fault of that hell-born horse. Nothing could induce it to go away. She decided to put on the final act—the *pièce de résistance* of the night. Her act. In the meantime, having become bored with his surroundings, Mr. Lamb sat down and, leaning against a tree, fell into a light doze.

When he next opened his eyes the curtains had been parted

on the flimsily constructed stage. His wife in his best pajamas was wallowing about in the arms of Leonard Gray, who was saying something about being "far from my own glade," in a high complaining voice. This bored Lamb beyond endurance. With a shriek of utter abandon he galloped toward the stage. Mr. Gray cast one horrified look at the speeding horse, then with amazing expedition got even farther from his own glade. Sapho also left at once, virtuously clutching the pants of Lamb's pajamas.

Springing to the stage, Lamb gave a drunken exhibition of a horse's idea of clog dancing. The audience was in confusion. In the midst of his hurricane efforts the stage collapsed, and Lamb disappeared beneath a small avalanche of scenery, planks, and trappings. Those who lingered to look back saw only a horse's head projecting from the ruins. The horse was either dead or asleep.

Later that night Lamb feebly dug himself out and sought his bucket. Someone had thoughtfully replenished it. He drank avidly and made his way to the front of the house. He had some vague idea about sleeping in the hammock, but failed to retain it. Resting his head on the first step, he draped himself across the lawn and drifted off.

Mrs. Lamb was awakened the next morning by the maid announcing that a passer-by had stopped to inform her that there was a dead horse on the lawn.

"I hope to God he is," said Mrs. Lamb, as she pulled the covers more securely over her head. Her only regret was that the animal was not buried and well out of sight.

Chapter VIII. What Happened to the Horse

AFTER SEVERAL OTHER EARLY COMMUTERS HAD INFORMED THE maid that a horse had passed out on the lawn Mrs. Lamb decided to look upon the gratifying sight herself. But when she reached the veranda the horse was no longer there, and the good lady was just as glad.

Lamb had awakened dizzily and made a tour of the ruins he had created. Vaguely only did he remember the events of the night. The little he did recall was sufficient to make him wish to forget.

"I'd better get the hell out of here," he said to himself. "There'll be no living within a mile of Tilly for some time to come."

He cantered off to the station and hung about there for a while, getting in the way of hurrying commuters and keeping an eye out for Sandra. When that young lady undulated into view he trotted up to her and stopped. So did Sandy. She put her arms round his neck and gave him a good morning kiss. Lamb became a horse of stone. Dimly he heard an insistent honking of horns, but paid little attention to them. He had lost all traces of his headache. Sandy had kissed them away. He glanced about him and discovered he was blocking the way of two motors, the drivers of which were far from resigned. Stepping aside politely, he looked after the retreating figure of the girl.

"She shouldn't have done that," thought Lamb, "but I'm not altogether sorry she did."

At this point a state trooper tried to do things about the horse. Lamb reared back on his hind legs and pawed at the air. The trooper hurried elsewhere and returned with a long noose rope.

"Thinks he's Will Rogers," said Lamb to himself, as he watched the trooper out of the tail of his eye.

Craftily anticipating the man's fell purpose, he took immediate steps to outwit him. Carelessly Mr. Lamb maneuvered himself alongside one of the town's most revered citizens, Mr. Robert Bates, fat, fifty, and influential—a factor in local politics. As the noose came swishing through the air Lamb crouched close to the ground and observed the rope neatly pinion Mr. Robert Bates's arms to his sides. Feeling the rope grow taut, the trooper tugged with a mighty effort and succeeded in pulling Mr. Bates completely over the back of the crouching horse. After that there were no impediments to bar the rapid progress of Mr. Robert Bates across the road.

The trooper wound the rope round a telegraph pole, secured it firmly, and turned to survey his prize. His prize lay struggling at his feet, emitting a long succession of unpleasant sounds terminating with "I'll break you for this, my man."

Naturally this little episode had neither gone unnoticed nor unappreciated. It was a pleasure to many to see Mr. Bates thus handled. It was no pleasure to the state trooper. The humor of the situation escaped him; but Mr. Bates did not escape. He would be with him always, the trooper feared. Mr. Lamb with a triumphant neigh left the poor fellow explaining to the sizzling first citizen that the unfortunate occurrence was entirely due to the horse, and thunderingly cleared the town. Thereafter all that remained of the horse was a not unblemished reputation.

Mr. Lamb was next discovered straining his neck to reach a particularly delectable blackberry on the edge of the woods. Several children, shepherded by an elder sister, were regarding the enterprising horse. They had never seen a horse pick blackberries. The children decided that he was a "funny horse" and made a jubilant noise about it. Mr. Lamb, with a start of surprise, beheld his admiring audience and immediately fell to cropping grass in the conventionally accepted manner. The children then drew near the horse and patted him with small adventurous hands. The horse did tricks to amuse them, and they brought him a wild flower to smell. Amazingly the horse smelled it, rolling his eyes to show his appreciation. He was enjoying himself more than he had for years. Presently the horse took leave of the children and once more sought the road. The children returned home to hamper their mother's activities by telling about the funny horse.

After this pastoral interlude, Mr. Lamb continued cheerfully on his way. Many miles now separated him from Sapho. He regretted the absence of Hebe. A pity she too, could not have turned into a horse. The little russet man was responsible for it all. Had Lamb only realized it at the time of their last conversation he would have arranged things differently—introduced an element of order. However, the little russet man had given him no chance. Now Lamb did not know how things

stood, whether he was to be a horse permanently, or when he would stop being a horse. All such details should have been considered.

Mr. Lamb had taken to the more unfrequented roads and was now in a territory unknown to him. He was decidedly on the loose. He came to a meadow in which several sleek-looking mares were grazing. To Mr. Lamb they seemed quite girlish. Without further ado he leaped the fence and swaggered up to the mares. His unexpected arrival created quite a sensation. The mares were all a-twitter. One began to tremble nervously from an excess of sex consciousness. The stouter of her girl friends merely gazed at Mr. Lamb with an expressively submissive look. The third, however, was a mare of another color. She looked at Mr. Lamb for a long moment with a bold, appraising eye and seemingly found him to her liking. Then she trotted off to a secluded part of the meadow, occasionally glancing back at Mr. Lamb and tossing her head prettily.

This mare interested Mr. Lamb strangely. At the same time something urged him to proceed with caution. There was no good in that mare. Mr. Lamb followed her. There was something on his mind. He was trying to remember the image the mare evoked. Something about the eyes. Whose eyes were they?

When he reached the mare's side he peered into her eyes thoughtfully. The mare returned his gaze languorously and rubbed her nose against his. Mr. Lamb started back offended. Then he remembered. This passionate creature had the eyes of Sapho when she was developing her art in the arms of Leonard Gray. Undeterred by the rebuff of her first effort, the mare circled round Mr. Lamb, gradually closing until she again stood at his side. Suddenly she turned and bit his neck, then sped away.

"Well, if she thinks I'm going to follow her," thought Mr. Lamb, "she has another think coming. They're all alike the world over. This mare is determined to get me into some compromising situation."

He spent the remainder of the afternoon alternately grazing and repulsing the mare's advances. Her two friends looked at him hopefully from time to time, but were ladylike enough to

leave him to his own devices. Finally the mare, disgusted with this aloof, dignified, and apparently unemotional stallion, abandoned her attempts to seduce him and contented herself with gazing at him scornfully. She joined her companions, and the three of them put their heads close together. Occasionally they would lift them for a moment and look steadily at Mr. Lamb, then resume once more their intimate conversation. Lamb, growing uncomfortable under the continual scrutiny of the horses sought another section of the meadow, but the mares, as if fascinated, followed him at a respectful distance and discussed his every move.

The situation was becoming intolerable, and Mr. Lamb was heartily thankful when at sunset the three mares trotted off to one end of the meadow and waited there expectantly. Lamb followed them at a casual amble, and when a sleepy-looking farm-hand presently plodded up to the fence and opened a gate, Mr. Lamb slipped by unnoticed with the other horses and continued with them across the field to the stable.

"This is what might be termed crashing the gate," he said to himself, as he entered the stable and sought refuge in an empty stall.

He would have been perfectly satisfied with the oats the farm-hand had provided had not the shameless mare kept thrusting her head over the partition in order the better to observe him crunch. Eating oats was a new experience to Lamb. He would have preferred to have practiced it alone, but every time he glanced up, the mare's large eyes were fixed upon him with such unabashed curiosity that Lamb immediately suspended action and pretended he had finished.

Apparently the acquisition of a strapping new stallion meant nothing in the life of the sleepy farm-hand. He closed the stable doors and went his way, and Lamb to escape the prying eyes of the abandoned animal in the next stall, lay down, placed his head on a bucket and prepared to sleep. After the indulgence of the previous night, he was too tired to ponder over the radically altered circumstances of his existence. But before he took leave of consciousness Mr. Lamb once for all washed

his hands of the inquisitive mare, who was moving restlessly about in the next stall.

Mr. Burnham was not quite so unobservant as his handyman, the name being in this instance strictly a courtesy title. When he discovered the sleeping stallion the next morning his heart was filled with wonder and admiration.

"Why didn't you tell me of this, Sam?" he demanded of the farm-hand.

"Didn't rightly notice it myself," replied that individual. "He acted so natural-like, seemed he must belong."

"And if a cavalry regiment had quartered here last night," observed Burnham, "I dare say it would have meant the same thing to you."

He looked at the three mares suspiciously and hummed under his breath.

"I wonder—" he continued as if to himself, then catching the look of disgust in the brazen mare's eyes, he shook his head and returned once more to the sleeping stallion.

"Funny way for a horse to sleep." Mr. Burnham drew his right arm's attention to the horse's head resting on the bucket. The right arm also had failed to notice this. He agreed, however. It was a funny way for a horse to sleep.

Mr. Burnham then applied a foot with insistent pressure to the stallion's rump, and Mr. Lamb looked up with sleepy indignation. Gazing for a moment at the two strange faces, he replaced his head on the bucket and closed his eyes.

"Get up, sir!" commanded Mr. Burnham, and this time the application of the foot was slightly more vigorous.

"If this sort of thing is going to continue," thought Lamb gloomily, "I might as well abandon all thoughts of sleep."

He rose, stretched his great body and stepped out of his stall. The two men followed his movements in silence. Lamb walked out into the stable yard and, seeing a large trough full of water under the pump, plunged his head deep into it. Very busily he put in his front legs and twirled his hoofs around. Picking up an empty flour sack, he tossed it about his head until he was partially dry. After this Mr. Lamb felt considerably refreshed. He lifted his head proudly and looked down at

the silently watching men. Even the farm-hand had been able to detect something out of the ordinary in the actions of the horse.

"Well, Sam, what do you think of that?" asked Mr. Burnham, inhaling a deep breath.

Thinking was one of Sam's most vulnerable points. He was unable to put into words his confused mental reactions.

"It ain't right," was all he said.

"If nobody claims that stallion," declared Mr. Burnham, "I'm going to enter him in the show this Saturday. He's the finest body of a horse I've seen in years."

At this Mr. Lamb set himself and paced gallantly round the yard. He fully intended to earn his meal ticket. Sam eyed the horse with growing suspicion. His imagination was at last aroused.

"Feed him," said Mr. Burnham, "and keep him well groomed. I'm going to make inquiries. This seems like a gift from heaven. Those mares need entertainment."

Burnham made inquiries throughout the course of the week, but could find no claimant to the stallion. Those who had seen the horse, or who had even heard remotely about it, declared they would have nothing to do with it. They did not want that horse. As a result of his investigations, Mr. Burnham had no scruples in attaching the horse to himself. And Mr. Lamb was well pleased to be attached. He was living on the fat of the land, and Sam, in spite of his mental deficiencies, was proving himself to be an entirely satisfactory valet.

On Saturday Lamb was taken to the show. It was a semi-bucolic affair, a thing of barter and trade, but more than a thousand horse-lovers were present and assembled about the field. Mr. Lamb was placed in a shack and carefully guarded by Sam. The stallion seemed greatly elated. Mr. Lamb was really anxious to win a prize—to establish a name for himself and Mr. Burnham.

It was a gala day for Sam. Lamb noticed that his valet was not too dumb to indulge copiously in corn whisky, a great bottle of which was reposing on a table in the shack. As time passed, Lamb began to grow nervous. He hated waiting. When

Sam stepped outside to view the world, Mr. Lamb quickly elevated the bottle and drained its contents. His nervousness immediately left him. He knew he would win a prize. Nothing now could stop him. Sam returned and looked at the bottle with an injured expression.

"Someone's been in here," he muttered. "Like to catch 'em at it."

He departed again and presently returned with another bottle, which he uncorked and sampled appreciatively.

"Watch that bottle," he told the stallion when he next left to mingle with the throng. "And if anyone tries to get at it kick 'em through the shed."

Mr. Lamb made sure that no one would take liberties with the bottle. He introduced the fiery fluid into his system and felt even more convinced that he was certain to win practically all the prizes.

A few minutes later, when he was taken out to be judged, the whisky was taking full effect on him. Mr. Burnham was so keyed up himself, he failed to remark the staggering gait of the stallion. However, the judges and spectators noticed it as Mr. Lamb was led thrice past the stand. When he endeavored to prance bravely he got all tangled up in his legs.

"How many legs have I?" he wondered. "Seem to have grown an extra pair."

"That horse seems to think he's imitating a drunkard," observed a judge. "What on earth does he think he's doing?"

When he was brought up to be looked over at closer range Mr. Lamb almost fell over one of the judges. He succeeded in regaining his balance, only by stepping heavily on that shocked dignitary's foot. To make matters worse Lamb was seized with a violent attack of hiccoughs which he was unable to control. There was a strong smell of alcohol in the air. The judge regarded Mr. Burnham suspiciously.

"Got to do something to make up for all this," Mr. Lamb said to himself. "Wonder what I can do—some sort of a stunt —something a little different."

An idea grew and flourished in his dizzy brain.

"I'll be a hobby-horse," he said to himself. "That's the very

thing. I dare say nobody ever saw a live hobby-horse before."

He thought for a moment, then stiffening his legs and placing his hoofs close together, he began to rock forward and aft, gaining momentum with each swing. Every eye in the multitude was riveted on Mr. Lamb. The judge stepped back and regarded him indignantly. This animal was making a fool of them—taking their horse show altogether too lightly. Cheers of encouragement broke from the spectators. They went to Mr. Lamb's head. With gratified expression he redoubled his efforts. Mr. Burnham looked on helplessly, disgust written in every line of his face. He felt as if he had been betrayed. Mr. Lamb turned his head and winked at his owner as if to say, "We'll show these hicks something new in the line of a horse."

He did. Each rock was bringing him nearer to the ground. Finally, in an excess of zeal, Lamb made one supreme effort. He pitched recklessly forward, held his position for one breathless moment, then nose first continued to the ground where he remained with eyes tightly closed.

"I won't look," he said to himself. "This is the end. I'm disgraced."

"Will you please take that thing away?" asked one of the judges, turning to the humiliated Burnham. "We don't want it at this show."

Burnham tried to raise his crumpled horse—the heaven-sent—but Mr. Lamb refused to budge. One of the judges knelt down beside him and sniffed.

"How crude!" thought Lamb dreamily. "These judges!"

"Why, this horse has been drinking corn whisky," the judge announced, rising. "The animal is actually dead-drunk. Disgraceful, Burnham, I say. Never heard of any such a thing in my life. Take him away."

Burnham, regarding the stallion, wondered exactly how the judge expected him to take his entry away. He certainly could not carry the besotted horse from the field in his arms. Nothing less than a derrick would be required to lift that body. The judges apparently were of this opinion, too, for they removed themselves to another section of the field and continued with the show. Lamb remained recumbent, gently snoring, in the

center of the field. A circle of admiring spectators had gathered round him.

Before the day was done Mr. Burnham had sold the heaven-sent to a fancy truck farmer. The price given had reflected no credit on the value of Mr. Lamb. The truck farmer had turned in his own horse as part payment.

Darkness had fallen by the time Mr. Lamb had recovered sufficiently to be driven away. When he came to his senses he found himself harnessed to a light farm wagon. He was being driven along a country road.

"Sold down the river," he mused to himself. "Parted from family and friends."

Monotonously the fields and trees moved past. Lamb began to recognize the road. He remembered certain landmarks. They were going in the direction of his home. Presently his new master drew rein and getting down from his seat, began to search in the back part of the wagon. Lamb fell into a light doze. When the farmer returned he found a man clad only in pajamas standing where just a moment ago his recently acquired horse had stood. The man seemed a bit dazed and was pulling at the shafts. At first the farmer was afraid to approach, then indignation got the better of his timidity. He strode up to the white-clad figure and looked at it wrathfully.

"What are you doing there?" he demanded.

Lamb started and looked down at himself.

"By God, I'm back," he said under his breath; then turning to the farmer, he replied, "Just fooling with these shafts."

"And what did you do with my horse?" continued the farmer.

Mr. Lamb dropped the shafts and seated himself by the roadside. The farmer followed his example.

"What could I have done with your horse?" asked Mr. Lamb. "Do you suppose that I tore him limb from limb and scattered his parts to the four winds?"

"No," said the man after a thoughtful pause. "You couldn't have done that."

He paused and considered Mr. Lamb with thoughtful eyes.

"Then you were the horse," he announced in positive tones. "You must have been the horse."

"What, me?" exclaimed Mr. Lamb. "You're crazy, sir. Do I faintly resemble a horse?"

"Not now, you don't," replied the man with conviction, "but a minute ago you did, and what's more, you acted like a horse—not a very good horse, but enough of a horse to get along with. Now you're no earthly good to me."

"Well, I'm relieved you recognize that fact," said Mr. Lamb. "What are we going to do about it?"

"Listen," said the man, as if endeavoring to explain the strange occurrence to himself. "This business isn't as simple as it seems to you. This evening at the show I bought you for a horse. You were dead-drunk on the field in front of hundreds of people. In spite of that I bought you and gave you another chance. I was going to give you a nice home and keep you away from drink. I've been over the ropes myself. Don't object to a little fun within reason, but—"

"It's all right about that," put in Mr. Lamb. "Go on with this remarkable yarn."

"It does sound crazy when I hear myself telling it," admitted the man. "But it's true just the same, every word of it. I got you sort of sobered up and started off home with you. Everything was getting along nicely. At this spot I got down from my seat and turned my back on you for a minute. When I turned back—no horse. You were standing between the shafts pulling like the devil. Now answer me this," he continued in a reasonable voice, turning full on Mr. Lamb. "A minute ago there was a horse, or the dead image of a horse, standing between those shafts. If you weren't that horse, who was the horse or what was the horse? Answer me that."

Mr. Lamb did not want to answer him that. He realized that the man—any man—was mentally unequipped to be told the true state of affairs. He himself was reluctant to admit the terrible thing that had happened to him. It was too far removed from the kingdom of God as generally conceived. It was too mythological. Only a pagan would believe and understand. And back of it all, Lamb knew, was the little russet man.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Lamb slowly. "It was like this: when I was a very little boy I just loved to play horse. That's a fact. I played horse so much and so long that I was never able to break myself of the habit. To this day—would you believe it?—I still play horse. It's a weakness—a failing. It's like strong drink to other men."

Lamb halted to see what impression he was making on his erstwhile owner. The man seemed absorbed in the story. Lamb himself was beginning to believe it.

"Well tonight," he continued, "I gave a bit of a party, and I guess we all had a little too much. I remember after going to bed that it struck me as being rather a good idea to get up and play horse. I slipped from my bed, you understand, quiet as anything so as not to wake up my wife, who suffers from insomnia just like her mother, and whose brother has lumbago, poor chap. Without making any noise I crept downstairs, turned the key in the front door lock and ran down the road. I ran and ran and ran. After a while I came to this wagon and crawled in between the shafts, and then you came along. That's how the whole thing happened."

The climax seemed rather smeared for a good story, but it was the best that Lamb could achieve at the moment. He looked at the man hopefully and regretted to see that the farmer's face had fallen considerably. Apparently he had lost interest in the story.

"It's all right," he said, "but it doesn't explain what became of my horse."

"There really wasn't ever any horse at all, was there?" asked Lamb, evasively.

"No," replied the farmer with elaborate sarcasm. "I was dragging this wagon along by myself just for exercise."

There followed an uncomfortable silence.

"Well, I'm sure," said Mr. Lamb at last, as he rose and stretched himself wearily, "I can't imagine what can have happened to your horse. You can see for yourself that I'm not anything like a horse."

"But I'm not so sure," the farmer replied, "that you weren't

a horse a little while back. There's something queer about all this."

"All right, have it your way," said Lamb with a yawn. "I'm not your horse now. Have you any old bags in that wagon you don't need?"

The farmer tossed him a couple of sacks which Lamb draped about his long body.

"What am I going to do about the wagon?" demanded the farmer in a gloomy voice.

"Wait here for that horse," said Lamb. "He's sure to come back if he ever existed at all. I begin to fear he was not alone in his cups."

The farmer watched Mr. Lamb trudge off down the road, then seating himself once more on the moist leaves and grass, he thought over the strange events of the day until his head began to swim. Dawn found him still sitting there waiting for a horse that would never return.

"Why," Lamb asked himself, as he climbed quietly through one of the lower windows of his own house, "why, if that little russet chap took my silly outburst seriously, does he insist on making a practical joke of it?"

Like a thief he stole upstairs and crawled into bed. Someone was sleeping beside him. Switching on the light he gazed on the face of his neighbor. It was Mr. Leonard Gray. Lamb grinned and quietly got back into bed after turning off the light.

"These rehearsals are getting better and better," he thought as he composed his limbs for slumber.

Chapter IX. The Height of Tolerance

MR. LEONARD GRAY WAS NOT HABITUALLY AN EARLY RISER, BUT some extra special instinct urged him to be up and doing this morning. Perhaps, after all, the instinct was not so extra special. It may have been due merely to his sense of touch and Mr. Lamb's whiskers which were extremely hardy and assertive. Tough, stubbly whiskers were the last things in the world that

Mr. Gray expected to encounter. They had not been included in his plans. Consequently when it was borne in on him that he was tenderly stroking a cheek abundantly provided with a week's growth of knifelike hair he opened his eyes with no little interest to see wherein he had erred.

Nor had Mr. Lamb expected to have his whiskers stroked either tenderly or otherwise. In fact he had forgotten all about whiskers and imagined he was still a horse. He, too, opened his eyes and looked uncomprehendingly into those of Mr. Leonard Gray. Lamb drew back his lips and exposed his teeth in a most disagreeable expression, then suddenly realizing he was no longer a stallion, he controlled his natural impulse and grinned pleasantly at his companion. It is difficult to say whether the snarl or the grin did the most to upset Mr. Gray's delicately organized nerves. It came to the same thing in the end. With a stifled gasp the splendid fellow gave Mr. Lamb the entire bed and dartingly began to dress.

"Where's the fire?" asked Mr. Lamb easily. "No need to pop off like that. There's plenty of room in this bed. Lie down and get your beauty sleep."

"Only wish I could," the young man faltered, briskly slipping his arms through the legs of his trousers. "Must run along. Worked to all hours last night on the books of the Woodbine Players . . . got so fagged I couldn't go home. Crawled right into your bed and slept like a top."

"One of the most active gadgets I know," observed Mr. Lamb.

"That's so too," agreed Mr. Gray, grittily getting into his shoes. "Tops are active, aren't they?"

"Very," said Mr. Lamb, "when on pleasure bent."

This point having been settled there seemed to be nothing left to talk about. Mr. Lamb lay quietly back in bed and watched Mr. Gray at his toilet, his eyes following every movement of the desperate youth. This was terribly trying to Mr. Gray. Dressing to him was a ritual which he preferred to perform in private.

"Don't you ever wash in the morning?" Lamb asked at last, unable to restrain his curiosity.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Gray quickly. "Always wash in the morning, always."

"Well, you're not washing this morning," continued Mr. Lamb argumentatively.

"I will though, I will," the young man explained hastily. "When I get home I'll tub it."

"That will do you no end of good," said Mr. Lamb. "I say, your collar's all rucked up in the back, and for God's sake do something about those trousers. You can't face the world in such a confiding condition."

Mr. Gray with a convulsive movement tried to attend himself in two different places at once. Lamb continued to observe him with quietly brooding eyes. An old saber was hanging on the wall near the bed. Lamb lazily reached up and took it down. Mr. Gray redoubled his efforts as he watched his languid host delicately test the blade then thoughtfully transfer his gaze to him.

"Do you know something?" observed Mr. Lamb. "This old saber is very sharp. It would snip that head off your shoulders as easily as slicing cheese."

Gray gave an hysterical little laugh and continued his dressing in a far corner. Suddenly, Lamb half rose in bed and darted the saber at him. With a strangled cry Gray looked helplessly about him.

"Your vest," said Lamb. "Your vest. It's buttoned all wrong."

With dancing fingers the pride and joy of the Woodbine Players readjusted his vest, snatched up his coat and moved warily toward the door. If he could only make it life would be just a little bit more secure. The saber flashed out and barred his path. Gray shrank back.

"Before you leave," said Lamb, "I'd like to ask you a question, just one question."

Gray feared that question. Why had his torturer reserved it to the end? Suppose Sapho, unaware of her husband's return, should enter the room at this minute with some shockingly revealing endearment? Gathering his histrionic abilities for one heroic effort, he half looked at Lamb and smiled. His face gave

the impression of a wax figure that had partly melted in the sun. Lamb was studying his neck intently, and Mr. Gray was unhappily aware of his gaze. Also he was not forgetful of the presence of the saber. Was this to be the end of what he had fondly believed to be a picturesque career?

"Throw back your head," said Lamb abruptly, poising the saber in his hand.

Gray as if hypnotized elevated his chin and awaited the stroke of doom.

"If you think there's been anything—" he began, but Lamb cut in on his last-minute perjury.

"Tell me," said Lamb, his eyes still fixed hungrily on Mr. Gray's neck, "where do you buy your ties? I want you to get me some."

Gray almost collapsed. So that was the reason for Lamb's long scrutiny. He snatched at his neck and tore off the colorful decoration, tossing it to the man on the bed. "Here," he said hurriedly. "Take this one. Piles of them at home. I'll send some over."

"Bring 'em," suggested Lamb.

"I will," breathed Gray. "I will. First thing."

He left Lamb reclining on his bed happily inspecting the necktie. Sapho was sleeping the gloating sleep of a successfully unfaithful wife. Gray tiptoed past her door with face averted. No time to warn her now. Safety, assured bodily safety, was the first consideration. Never had life seemed so sweet. The fresh morning air fanned his face. He passed an unsteady hand across his forehead and found he had been perspiring profusely. Then the reaction came. He began to laugh softly—secretively. Lamb was such a fool, so ridiculously unaware of his horns. These husbands! They were all alike. And their wives. They were all alike, too, or almost all alike, if you pressed your campaign in a certain manner. By the time he had reached his home Mr. Leonard Gray had thoroughly convinced himself that the joke was on Mr. Lamb. In the meantime that gentleman to whose head he had so adroitly affixed horns was falling blissfully alseep with the saber held lightly in one hand and Mr. Gray's necktie in the other.

Hebe took a long chance that morning and quietly sought her father's room. She was surprised and delighted to find him there asleep, but a little puzzled by the playthings he had taken to bed with him. Mrs. Lamb had failed to announce to her daughter the presence of a visitor. If the truth must be known, she had entirely forgotten to tell anyone at all about it. The household had been unaware of the great honor Mr. Leonard Gray had conferred upon it. So far as Mrs. Lamb was concerned it would continue to remain unaware. Hebe thought there was something not distantly familiar about the necktie.

"The major must be getting childish," she said to herself as she gently closed the door.

"Sapho!" she whispered, and Sapho woke up with a startled cry. "Father is sleeping in his own bed for a change."

In utter consternation Mrs. Lamb looked at her daughter. Her frame of mind was not to be envied.

"Hebe," she said after a long pause, "I told you distinctly never to come near this part of the house on Sundays. Since that Vacation Fund affair and the strange disappearance of your father my nerves have gone to pieces. I need rest. I must have repose. You know it."

"But the major's back," replied Hebe. "Come and look."

That was just what Mrs. Lamb most objected to doing at that inauspicious moment. As she gazed blankly at her daughter a keen realization of the situation ominously grew within the lady.

"Have you seen him?" she asked, after a moment's hesitation.

"With these eyes," responded Hebe.

"Did he look—er—as usual?" Mrs. Lamb was growing confused.

There was something mysterious about that room. First her husband turned into a horse, then her lover turned into her husband. Peace and security seemed to have departed from the world.

"The picture of himself," answered Hebe, "only there was something sort of strange about him. He had a saber in one hand and a necktie in the other."

Mrs. Lamb gave a start and smothered an exclamation.

"What sort of necktie was it?" she asked.

"That's the funny part about it," said Hebe in a puzzled voice. "It didn't look like the major's at all. I have it! It looked exactly like Leonard Gray's."

"O-o-o-oh!" The sound came fluttering from Mrs. Lamb's lips. The color had left her face. So that was all that was left of Leonard Gray, only a necktie.

"Was the sword frightfully bloody?" she asked, fascinated by the horror of the situation.

"I didn't notice," said Hebe, looking strangely at her mother, "but I seem to think it was."

Once more the low cry issued from her mother's lips. She sank weakly back on her pillows and closed her eyes.

"Leave me," she said to her daughter.

Already she was picturing herself playing a most important rôle in a fashionable murder trial. Too bad about Leonard, though. Mrs. Lamb then considered her husband. She was more than a little suspicious of Lamb. A well-nigh unbelievable conviction was forming in her mind. For the past few days she had dismissed it, fearing it might unbalance her reason. There was no getting away from the fact, however, that it had been a strangely acting horse . . . so like her husband in many ways. The whole thing was mad, wild, impossible, but—but—if she were really married to a man who even occasionally turned into a horse, surely the courts could do something about it. Everything was altogether too much for Mrs. Lamb. It was not a successful Sunday morning. Her life should have been so different—so much larger and more magnificent. What sacrifices she had made in marrying that man! She was overwhelmingly sorry for herself and only a little bit sorry for Mr. Leonard Gray, indubitably deceased.

Later in the day Hebe was having a business meeting with Melville Long. The meeting was held on the veranda and presided over by a decanter of Scotch.

"There is only one of two things to be done," the young lady began briskly. "Either you'll have to ruin me or else start bootlegging."

"Why not do 'em both," suggested Long, "and thus make assurance doubly sure?"

"Might be something in that too," admitted his fair companion, "but the way I see things at present one or the other must be done."

"Well, I draw the line at ruination," declared Long in a more serious voice. "I'm off that ruination idea entirely."

"There's something in it," Hebe went on. "We won't dismiss it altogether. If you ruin me and I actually find myself with child—"

"*Enceinte* is the way nice people say it," Mr. Long corrected.

"Don't interrupt," said Hebe impatiently. "It all comes to the same thing in time. As I was saying, if I were actually beyond doubt that way I know the major would do the handsome thing. He'd see us safely married and give us a chunk of cash. He's got no end of money. Sapho would be annoyed at my carelessness, but the major would fix her. You see, then we'd be all married and everything."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Long. "Particularly everything. With the head start we'd have you could easily be a grandmother before you were thirty-five. Then again, there's an element of amateurishness about ruination. People might get the idea I didn't know my way around. Wouldn't like that. Bootlegging is better. I'd feel more independent."

"All right," said Hebe impartially. "Why not try that? We could make enough money in a year to start out on our own. Ruination can easily wait."

"I know a guy down in the slum district," Long continued meditatively. "He's a nice guy, and I know he'd start me off right—get me the stuff and all that."

"And we could use one of our cars," put in Hebe. "The big one. That would be slick for deliveries."

"We've certainly got to do something if we want to get married," the young man went on broodingly. "Honest work takes too long. Painting won't net me a red, and the old man absolutely refuses to come across until, as he puts it, I've proved myself. He goes on about me as if I were a problem in geometry. Always asking me to prove myself."

It was here that Sandra put in an appearance, and the edifying alternatives were explained for her consideration.

"I think," said Hebe on concluding, "that ruination would be the best and safest, don't you?"

"It would be by far the most agreeable," Sandy decided. "Also the most effective. Bootlegging though is pretty exciting. I'd like to try it myself. And Mel has a lot of rich friends. He could poison them for a long time before they actually died or lost their sight."

"By the way," said Hebe, changing the subject for her friend's benefit, "the major's back."

Sandra brightened visibly, and Long looked startled.

"That's so nice," said Sandra. "Is he tired of being a horse?"

"Don't know," replied Hebe. "Haven't spoken with him yet. He was pounding when I last saw him."

During Mr. Lamb's absence the three young people had discussed him earnestly and had come to the conclusion that, as incredible as it seemed, he had been the horse. All had advanced their reasons, and they had seemed incontrovertible. Hebe had even related her father's experience with the russet man and his strange behavior. This had clinched matters. Mr. Lamb had been and probably still was the horse. There was no getting around that amazing fact. Not being so far removed from fairy tales themselves they accepted Mr. Lamb's metamorphosis without much difficulty.

At this moment the subject of their conversation blithely entered the room. He was resplendent in Mr. Gray's tie.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman," he said amiably, then turning to his daughter. "Did you get my letter Hebe?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Hebe with undisguised sarcasm. "And all your telegrams and that lovely box of candy."

Mr. Lamb sat down and considered the three young people with an affable expression.

"I forgot to tell either you or your mother," he continued, the lie coming with surprising readiness, "that I have an important deal on in Philadelphia. I might have to pop off at any moment. Probably open an office there."

"Why not a livery stable?" suggested Hebe.

Mr. Lamb favored his daughter with a false laugh.

"Why a livery stable?" he asked daringly.

"Honest to God," spoke up Sandra, "tell us something. Weren't you that horse? You're among friends."

"Suppose I should say yes?" parleyed Mr. Lamb.

"Then I'd say that you were one of the worst and best horses I've ever ridden," replied Sandra.

Lamb considered the situation for a short time. He realized that these three young people not only thought he was the horse, but also knew he was the horse.

"What do you think?" he asked turning to the tactfully mute Melville Long.

"Well," said Long, "no natural-born horse could have consumed cocktails the way that horse did. Never saw anything like it. And the sandwiches—it must have had human blood in its veins."

Lamb was regarding Sandra closely. What would she think if he came out and admitted that he had been the horse? She could never possibly afford to associate with a man who turned into things. At the moment he heartily regretted ever having had anything to do with the little russet man. He bowed his head and unhappily studied the extreme tips of his shoes.

"I guess I was that horse," he said at last in a low voice. "I don't know much more about it than you all do. It just happened. There I was—a horse. But I'm not a horse now," he added hopefully.

Hebe went over to her father and gave him one of her rare kisses. Sandra sat as close to him as possible without sitting on his lap.

"Do you remember," she said, "I kissed you?"

"I might be a horse again or something worse at any moment," Mr. Lamb looked at her warningly.

"How does it feel to be a horse, Mr. Lamb?" Melville Long's voice was replete with interest.

"Remarkable," began Mr. Lamb and stopped.

A motor was fussing up the gravel in the driveway. Mrs. Lamb came in and sank down exhausted. Even the sight of her husband failed to revive her. Then she saw the tie. She sat

up, an expression of horror marring her features. All day long she had been searching for traces of Leonard Gray, hoping against hope that he might have escaped with only a wound. Here was the person who had done her lover—perhaps her last—to death, callously conversing while his victim's necktie, like a trophy of war, hung flauntingly from his neck.

Mr. Lamb went through all about Philadelphia again. Mrs. Lamb scarcely heard him. Her eyes were fixed on the colorful tie. Hebe, noticing the direction of her mother's gaze, also looked on the necktie and become uncomfortably interested in it.

"That's a terrible tie, major," she remarked. "Where did you get it?"

"Ask your mother about that," replied Mr. Lamb easily. "She knows more about my neckties than I do."

"Murderer!" Mrs. Lamb had been unable to restrain the accusation.

Mr. Lamb sat up appalled.

"Have I killed someone?" he asked. "This is the first I've heard of it. Hebe made no mention of a murder."

Mrs. Lamb, now beyond control, came close to him and extended a tragic finger.

"What did you do with the body?" she demanded in a low vibrating voice. "And all the blood. What became of that?"

Mr. Lamb was no more startled than were Hebe and her friends. Their round eyes regarded the murderer wonderingly. Mr. Lamb pulled himself together and returned the accusing gaze of his wife.

"What did you do with the body first?" he inquired. "That would be more to the point."

Mrs. Lamb turned away and walked to the window. Her face was safe from scrutiny. At that moment Mr. Leonard Gray himself saw fit to arrive.

"Here they are!" he cried, placing a package on Mr. Lamb's lap. "All new. Went into the city and picked them out myself. If you like the tie you're wearing, you'll go crazy about these."

"Meet my chum, everybody," said Mr. Lamb quietly. "We're roommates now. Thanks for the ties, Len."

Mrs. Lamb with a distracted look about her, fluttered her hands above her head and left the room. Leonard Gray followed. The murderer threw himself back in his chair and favored Sandra, Hebe, and Mr. Long with a benign smile.

"And they all lived happily ever after," he said.

"Let's have a look," urged Hebe. "Mel could use a new tie."

Mr. Lamb obligingly opened the package.

Chapter X. Lamb Takes the Air

"SUPPOSE I SHOULD TELL HIM I'VE JUST GOTTEN OVER BEING a horse?" Lamb mused to himself, as he politely eyed his customer, an aged person of many motheaten millions. "I guess the old blighter would drop those bonds and close his account on the spot."

He resisted the temptation to experiment with the old gentleman and thereby materially added to his own not inconsiderable wealth.

When his customer had departed, Lamb summoned his secretary to him and told her all about Philadelphia. He had already told her about Philadelphia, but this time he told her better. He shrouded his future movements in tantalizing mystery. Lamb was taking no chances. God only knew what the little russet man had in store for him, and Lamb very much doubted if he had taken even God into his confidence. He would have liked to have had a short conversation with the little russet man, but he knew of no way to get in touch with him.

All that week Mr. Lamb had been hearing about the horse. He had gleaned impressions from many unexpected sources. The stallion had created no end of excitement in the town and surrounding countryside. An enterprising reporter had strung together a story which the city people laughed at and dismissed, little realizing that it was the most conservatively handled piece of news in the paper. Simonds was the most voluble about the horse. Almost the most bitter. He had sent his own horse away for a change of scene. The poor animal was

actually pining away in its lot, constantly fearing a return of that diabolical stallion. The state trooper had lost his easy post. He no longer postured about the station, a target for the come-on glances of women who with a sigh of relief had seen the last of their husbands for that day.

Lamb was highly edified by what he heard. He had been a horse among horses. His exploits would be remembered. Whenever Mrs. Lamb referred viperously to the Vacation Fund débâcle he would thoughtfully finger his necktie and look at her significantly. Mrs. Lamb quickly changed the subject. Leonard Gray's neckties were constantly reminding her of a most disturbing interruption of what had started out to be an unusually diverting week-end.

"Wonder what we're going to be next?" Hebe speculated one evening, entering into the situation with the enthusiasm of her years. "How'd you like to be a giraffe?"

"God forbid," said Mr. Lamb quickly. "I hope the little chap feels that he has sufficiently convinced me of the unwisdom of unconsidered wishing."

But the little russet man did not feel that way about it, and when Lamb woke up one morning he found himself perched precariously on one of the four posts of his bed. When he attempted to stretch, as was his wont, he heard an unfamiliar swish in the air.

"I'm something else," he said to himself. "Wonder what it can be?"

Fluttering lightly to the floor, he observed himself in the mirror. His excitement was intense. What he saw was a smoky-looking seagull with black rings round its eyes. The effect was that of detached thoughtfulness. Mr. Lamb spread his wings and looked with approval on their snow-white lining. He was a good gull.

"As gulls go," he admitted to himself, "I dare say I'm about as good as they come. Wonder how it feels to fly? Don't know the first thing about it."

He went to the table and looked at his watch. Sandra would be taking the usual train. He had plenty of time.

"No use disturbing the household," he thought, hopping to

the open window and balancing himself on the edge. "Well here goes for a Lindbergh. Hope I don't foul a tree."

Lamb extended his wings and took the air. He landed in some confusion among the box bushes, but managed to beat his way out with the loss of only a few unimportant feathers.

"Must do better than that," he commented. "I'd best try a couple of take-offs."

He gave himself a running start and left the ground. This time he flew with gathering confidence and landed on Hebe's window, upon which he tapped gently. That young lady woke up without effort and immediately let him in. She had schooled herself to be surprised at nothing and to be prepared for anything. She looked at her father with admiring envy.

"Golly," she said "I wish I was in your shoes."

Lamb extended one claw and emitted a peculiar crackling noise intended to be a laugh.

"How does it feel to fly, major?" his daughter continued.

The gull gave an exuberant hop expressive of much enjoyment, and Hebe understood.

"How about grub?" asked Hebe. "I suppose you don't fancy a couple of succulent worms?"

The gull shuddered and almost twisted its head off in the violence of its opposition to this revolting suggestion.

"Well, come along," said Hebe, slipping into her dressing-gown and quietly opening the door.

Mr. Lamb, skipping lightly behind his swift-footed daughter, followed her to the pantry where she set before him a bowl of puffed rice and cream. When he had eaten his fill of this he delicately polished his beak on a convenient napkin and spread his wings gloriously for the benefit of his daughter. After this he left the house and made his way to the station.

From a great height he saw Sandra leaving her house to start off for the station. Swooping dizzily down the air lanes, he circled round her head, then came to rest at her feet. Without a moment's hesitation, for Sandra had also been warned to be prepared for anything, she picked him up and held his head against her warm neck. Mr. Lamb was so elated that he freed himself and tried to loop-the-loop. This enterprising

endeavor resulted in a small disaster. Mr. Lamb found himself flat on his back in the gutter. His claws were busily churning the air. It was a ludicrous sight, and Sandy laughed at the gull. Lamb adjusted himself with as much dignity as he could summon to his aid and after a certain amount of necessary preening, preceded the girl to the station in a more orderly if not so spectacular manner. As he planed along the platform he took occasion to knock off Simonds's hat and had the satisfaction of seeing it roll to the tracks, where its usefulness was destroyed by the thundering arrival of the city-bound express.

When no one was looking Mr. Lamb slipped into the baggage-car and hid himself behind a trunk. Later when he had made sure that the conductor was several cars ahead, he made his way on foot through the train. He was searching for Sandra. As the gull swayed cautiously down the aisle of the first car heads popped out from behind newspapers and amused eyes followed his progress. Mr. Lamb was uncomfortably aware of the interest he was creating.

"Why can't they mind their own business," he thought, "instead of staring at me?"

At the end of the car he turned and favored its occupants with a hoarse cry, at the sound of which several heads darted back behind the newspapers.

The other half of Sandra's seat was unoccupied. Mr. Lamb quietly hopped up to it and sidled as close to her as possible. She spread her paper accommodatingly and together they read the news of the day. From this Mr. Lamb looked up in time to discover the approach of the conductor. Mr. Lamb wanted no trouble. He was too large a gull to hide, too large to creep under the seat. Then a brilliant idea occurred to him. With one swift, insinuating look at Sandra he fell down on the seat and allowed his head to dangle over it. The head swayed distastefully with the rhythm of the train. To all intents and purposes the young lady was carrying a dead seagull to the city. Sandra after some quick thinking fathomed Mr. Lamb's intention and ordered her actions accordingly.

The conductor, arriving at her seat, looked down at the

seagull with an expression of disgust. Years of service had inured him to all types of commuters. He had seen them carrying all sorts of surprising packages from vacuum cleaners to French pastry. He had never, however, previously encountered a commuter carrying a dead seagull.

"That's a strange thing to be lugging about with you," he informed Sandra.

"He just died," replied the girl sadly. "I'm taking him to be stuffed. The poor old thing has been in our family for years."

She picked Mr. Lamb up by his legs and dangled him convincingly before the conductor's eyes. Although Lamb felt a rush of blood to his head, he continued to act the part of a dead gull. The conductor seemed convinced, especially when the bird flopped limply against his face. The remainder of the trip was uneventful, and when the train reached the station Sandra once more seized Mr. Lamb by the legs and carried him out with her. He was very much squeezed and rumpled. Once when a stout lady backed into him he was forced to resort to rather brutal tactics in order to induce her to remove a large portion of herself from his face. With an indignant expression, the stout lady looked suspiciously about her, then hewed a path through the crowd.

By the time he had been carried to the street Lamb was literally almost a dead gull. He cocked his head up as well as he could and looked pleadingly at the girl. She took him in her arms and smoothed his feathers. Lamb felt better. Then to the astonishment of many onlookers he rose in the air and circled above Sandra's head. The onlookers glanced at the girl questioningly. They had seen an apparently dead seagull come to life and fly away. Sandra was unconscious of their gaze. Higher and higher mounted the gull. All he could see now was the white face of the girl straining up to him. Impulsively, she raised one hand in farewell and something white fluttered in the air, then she faded from view.

For some reason, when Sandra turned away, her eyes were just a little bit moist. She wondered if he were lonely up there and if he would ever come back.

"He doesn't know the first thing about being a seagull," she said to herself. "Anything could happen to him up there. Might even run into an airplane."

All that day Sandra was a greatly preoccupied young lady in underwear. She kept remembering the excited throbbing of the bird's heart as she had held it in her arms. Mr. Lamb was rapidly becoming a problem seriously to be considered. His sardonic grin and long lean body drifted across her vision. She was very much afraid she loved this man who happened at the moment to be a bird floating somewhere about in the sky. One of the reasons that made her more than suspect she loved him was the fact that she so thoroughly detested his wife.

"Have you any knowledge of your father's movements?" Mrs. Lamb asked her daughter that night.

"Not the slightest," answered Hebe truthfully, "but if you'd taken the trouble to look you'd have seen there's been a bird in his room."

Mrs. Lamb was slightly revolted. If she were only sure. If she could only get absolute proof. She thought of life with Leonard Gray and chewed her steak with abandon.

That night Hebe put a bowl of puffed rice on the back steps. At three o'clock in the morning she was awakened by a series of wild cries, and going to the window, saw a large bird chasing a cat round the yard. When she came down to breakfast, all that remained of the combatants was some fur and a few feathers. Hebe picked one of the feathers up and examined it attentively. It was smoky-gray with a dash of white on the inside.

"The major's been here all right," said Hebe, half aloud, as she collected the rest of the feathers and carried them to her room.

Chapter XI. An Aerial Interlude

MR. LAMB HAD BEEN A SEAGULL FOR SEVERAL DAYS AND HAD become a thoroughly experienced flyer. Since his defeat of the cat he had stedfastly refused to return home. He was going to

be a seagull up or down to the last detail, but in doing so he was becoming an extremely hungry bird, not being able to accommodate his appetite to raw fish and the cast-off bounty of ocean liners. Once he had brought himself to nibble at a fair-looking piece of grapefruit sliding along the waves, but had swallowed so much salt water in the attempt that he had been forced to abandon the object of his desire.

Today he had been feeling rather light-headed as he swooped and circled over lower Manhattan. His sharp eyes looked down into the dark cañons of stone pierced by many windows. He thought about the office buildings. He considered them from a new point of view. Hitherto he had looked on them as outstanding examples of American industry and progress. To have things to do with them had always given him a feeling of accomplishment—a comfortable sense of regimentation. Today he was not so sure.

"Millions of souls in those buildings," he mused, sweeping close to his own. "There's a good-sized town in that building of mine alone. And they're all working. Thousands of them loafing . . . just getting by. Poor pent-up devils! Suppose the little russet man had turned them all into gulls instead of picking on me. What a remarkable sight it would be. Trails of gulls issuing from every window. The air filled with the beat of many wings . . . all released!"

Lamb pictured the scene to himself. He was weary and painfully hungry. Still he soared—alone.

"Scissors dropped," he continued. "Pens rolling off abandoned desks. Stocks and bonds and crisp clean bank-notes suddenly left unguarded."

Lamb, in his reverie, saw the sky growing black with gulls. Birds pushing their way to freedom, crowding on one another. He painted a mental picture of a little group of conscientious gulls, still held by habit, poising on window ledges and peering back into their offices to make sure that all was in order before they took to the air. What a sight! A river of gulls, following the precedent of years, homeward bound across the bay to Staten Island. Another river flowing uptown, and a turbulent one into Brooklyn. A bridge of gulls passing over the Hudson.

It would split at various commuting tracks and grow thinner at each suburb. Gulls everywhere pecking at windows, vainly trying to get their wives to understand that something unusual had happened to them—actually to them, their time-tabled husbands.

Lamb's thoughts were growing wilder as his hunger increased. He saw dense masses of gulls flocking to the subway stations, impelled there by habit. The dark tunnels would be filled with several counter-flying columns of frantically surging wings. Gulls trampled on in trying to get out, when they might just as well have been flying in the open air. And the busses, too. They would be packed to the top rails. Birds swaying in close ranks. All going home—home to their wives. Mostly men.

The girl gulls wouldn't go home. Not they. . . . They would be far too enterprising. Down to the Island for them. Snatching free rides on the scenic railway, no doubt, and keeping their eyes peeled for boy friends they had never met. Some of them would infest chop-suey joints and flutter about to the tune of an automatic piano. Others would just hang round soda shops and giggle and wait for something to happen. But the fact remained, the girls would be pleasure-bent—sex-driven, alert, seeking—they wouldn't go home. Lamb could hardly blame them. He wasn't going home either. He was going to swoop around and pity the slaves in the office buildings below. He was—

"Oh, hell!" he broke in on his thoughts. "This isn't getting me anywhere. Must have food. I'll take a chance and try it."

He coasted down from his high place and landed in a narrow street before the doors of a restaurant in which he had usually taken his luncheon. The restaurant at that hour was crowded, but the smell of food and the hospitable clatter of plates were irresistible to Mr. Lamb in his famished condition.

"Well, here goes," he said to himself as he waited his opportunity and sidled unobtrusively into the restaurant.

Mr. Lamb's unusually sharp eyes picked out a table at which one man was sitting. This gentleman's head was completely hidden behind his newspaper and on the opposite side

of the paper, between it and Mr. Lamb, reposed a plate of chicken and French-fried potatoes. The waiters were in a fever of activity. Everyone was in one way or another occupied with food. The presence of the seagull passed unnoticed. The sight of the French-fried potatoes was too much for Mr. Lamb. Being a bird himself he decided that it would be rather indelicate to partake of the chicken. However, the potatoes would suffice. With the utmost caution he mounted the chair opposite the reading gentleman and, protruding a stealthy neck, fastened upon one of the potatoes. This swiftly disappeared. Once more his competent beak shot forth and another potato was done in.

By timing his forays judiciously, Mr. Lamb was getting along quite nicely—making a meal for himself. The table was a secluded one and was partly concealed by a railing. But all good things must come to an ending, and Mr. Lamb's luncheon was rudely interrupted. The man lowered his paper and looked with some surprise upon the seagull. The seagull froze in the chair, a portion of potato still protruding from its beak. The bird returned the man's stare unwinkingly. This man, Lamb decided, was a mild man. There should not be much trouble. Of course there would be some. No matter what happened it would be impractical to try to deprive him of the potatoes he had already eaten. The gentleman neatly arrested the progress of a hurtling waiter.

"I say," he said, looking thoughtfully at the waiter. "Don't you cook your food any more? Am I expected to swallow that thing feathers and all?"

The waiter, regarding the motionless bird, almost dropped the tray.

"I don't know how it happened, sir," he said. "It never did before."

"There's always a first time for everything," continued the gentleman patiently. "And by the way, you seem to be stuffing it from the wrong end."

"That gull's been stuffing hisself," replied the waiter and, quickly putting down his tray, seized upon Mr. Lamb, who

just managed to gulp down the remainder of the potato before he was carried from the restaurant.

"Be gentle with him," admonished the gentleman. "That bird is rather an innovation in the line of gulls."

Mr. Lamb sent him a parting look of gratitude.

"Well," he said to himself philosophically, as he was cast into the street, "this is the first time I've been given the bum's rush since the halcyon days of Jack's."

He arranged his feathers and watched some pigeons picking something on the street corner. His first instinct was to swoop down on them and appropriate their food. Then he thought better of it.

"I haven't come to that," he decided. "Damn if I'll bully pigeons yet."

A brilliant idea was shaping itself in his mind. He knew of a seafaring café on the river front that rejoiced in a number of stuffed birds. He had always considered them as rather dusty and repellent decorations, but somehow they seemed a part of the place. If he could only succeed in insinuating himself into this café he might be able to pass himself off as one of the stuffed birds and thus pick up some choice bits. The place as he remembered it still sported a free-lunch counter. Prohibition had left it undisturbed.

Mr. Lamb put his plan into action. It was not difficult, because most of the occupants were standing at the bar with their backs to the free-lunch counter. This consisted of a huge buffet with a long, low shelf upon which were displayed various ornaments which the proprietor seemed to feel were essential to the esthetic contentment of his guests. Lamb saw a boat in a bottle, a framed flag done in silk, some particularly ghastly part of a fish, and a neat little group of extremely unlifelike glass flowers.

Awaiting his chance, Lamb sprang lightly to the shelf among this weird collection and immediately poised his wings. Directly facing him over the bar was a stuffed owl and out of the corner of his eyes he could see a moth-eaten-looking hawk. He studied the technique of these two birds carefully. There were several others in the room, but he could not bring them into his

range of vision without turning his head which was thrust slightly down and forward over a dish of dried herring. This in his present state appealed to him greatly.

"I hate bolting down food," he thought, "but this is no time nor place to observe the niceties of table manners."

With a lightning-like dart of his head he snatched up one of the herrings and, cramming it into his mouth, once more became a stuffed bird. Only a slight tremor around the throat gave evidence of the activity that was going on within him.

Mr. Lamb made three more successful snatches before an interruption occurred. The interruption took the form of a stout gentleman with thick horn-rimmed glasses. Detaching himself from the bar, this individual lurched sleepily over to the lunch counter and leaned against it. He sampled a herring, then half turned to the bar the better to observe his friends.

"This bloated man is likely to camp here all day," thought Mr. Lamb dejectedly. "And if his friends come over and get into action they'll clean the place out."

Slowly moving his head as close as possible to the plate, he made a short, swift snatch. The herring was his, but the man had noticed something. He turned and looked hard at the gull, then transferred his eyes to the plate. Removing his glasses, he polished them deliberately and once more inspected the gull. As he walked over to the bar he stopped suddenly and looked back. Mr. Lamb was prepared for the move. He looked fixedly back at the man and just before he turned away Lamb slowly closed one eye. The man stopped in his tracks, swayed back to the gull and, getting his face very close to it, studied the bird for a full minute.

"Well, I give up," he muttered at last. "It must be the grog, but I didn't think I was as drunk as all that."

He hurried back to the bar and called for a double brandy. With this comfortably inside him, he returned once more to the gull.

It was unfortunate for the complete success of Mr. Lamb's luncheon that he was discovered in the act of consuming the largest herring of them all. He could not possibly hope to get the entire fish into his mouth. Realizing the fuddled condition

of the man, Lamb had decided that he would retain no clear impression of what he saw. Therefore he leisurely finished off the fish before the man's bulging eyes, and resumed his inanimate position. The drunkard clutched the edge of the buffet and held on.

"Tell me," he demanded thickly. "Are you a stuffed bird or not? For God's sake be one or the other or I'll go potty."

Mr. Lamb returned the man's pleading gaze with a cold, dead eye. Only one herring remained on the plate, and Mr. Lamb had his heart set on that. He was determined that the inebriate should not have it. Watching the gull closely, the man moved his hand slowly toward the last herring. Lamb allowed him to pick it up, then shot out his hand and tore it from his fingers.

"That settles it," said the man aloud, stepping hastily back from the buffet. "When stuffed birds begin to snatch food from customers' hands I'm through."

He lifted up his voice and demanded the immediate presence of the proprietor. That worthy party, bearing a mug of beer, joined him.

"What's wrong here?" he asked good-naturedly. "Not enough food?"

Still clinging to the buffet the man pointed a none too steady finger at the gull.

"Is that a stuffed bird?" he demanded. "Because if it is it must have been stuffed alive."

"Why, damn my eyes," said the proprietor, looking intently at the gull. "It must be a stuffed bird, although I don't rightly remember this one."

He paused and thought for a moment, then his face cleared. His mind insisted on explaining the presence of that bird. Unconsciously his imagination helped him.

"I remember now," he said. "We had a sort of a blowout last week, and one of the boys must have brung him in. That's it. That's just how it got here."

The other man looked at the proprietor with a pitying smile.

"Did you ever hear of a stuffed bird polishing off a plate of fish and fighting for the last one?"

"Did that bird do that?" asked the proprietor.

"That and more," declared the other. "The damn thing had the nerve to wink at me."

This last statement settled the proprietor's doubts. His customer was seeing things. That was all there was to it. He took the man by the arm and attempted to lead him away.

"Come on over," he said coaxingly. "I'll stand the drinks. After that you'd better go home."

This irritated the other considerably. He reached up and, seizing the gull by the feet, carried him to the bar. Mr. Lamb stiffened his body and awaited developments. He caught an inverted view of a cuspidor and a floor covered with sawdust before he was roughly hauled aloft.

"Gentlemen, I ask you," cried the stout man. "Is that a stuffed bird?"

Mr. Lamb was passed from hand to hand along the bar. He was minutely examined. His feathers were parted and skin inspected. In the course of his journey up and down the bar his head was dangled conveniently over several glasses of beer from which he drank with avidity, the herring having made him thirsty.

"Of course it's a stuffed bird," one of the men said at last. "What do you think it is? No live bird would let himself be handled like this without putting up a hell of a squawk."

"Jim's right," put in another voice. "Sure it's a stuffed bird."

"What do you mean, stuffed?" asked a skeptical individual. "Look at that bird's skin. It's altogether too fresh to be stuffed."

Lamb's skin was again examined and prodding fingers were thrust into various parts of his body. The wear and tear was beginning to tell on him.

"This is no go," he said to himself. "Those drunkards will make a wreck out of me."

"Well, put him down and let's have a drink on it," a reasonable voice suggested. "What do we care whether he's stuffed or unstuffed? It's all the same to me."

Lamb was placed at the end of the bar and allowed to get his breath. The gentlemen returned to their drinking.

"I earned that luncheon," he said to himself, thirstily watching the glasses. "I'd better be shoving off now before they're at me again."

He kept his eye fixed on the original cause of the investigation and, when that tippler's head was tilted back, leaped upon it and fastened his claws in the thick hair. Flapping his wings violently, Lamb strained his throat in a piercing cry and pulled with all his might. The man's cry was as piercing as the bird's. He staggered across the room and crashed to the sawdust, leaving in Mr. Lamb's claws several tufts of hair. Thoroughly interested now, Mr. Lamb swept down the bar, overturning glasses in his flight. Most of the investigation committee had taken refuge behind chairs and tables. With a final scream of triumph Lamb circled the room and made his exit through a conveniently open window.

"What did I say?" demanded the prostrate man in an injured voice. "I told you it wasn't a stuffed bird."

"Well, what in hell was it?" someone asked. "It wasn't a regular seagull. No normal bird has sense enough to act stuffed."

"I'm glad we all saw it," said a third, "or I'd be feeling awful now."

The gentlemen emerged from their various places of shelter and returning to the bar looked up at the owl suspiciously.

Lamb, dropping the hair in some innocent bystander's face, flew out over the harbor and settled himself on a wave. Here he was presently joined by a venerable-looking seagull who, without any form of salutation, plopped himself down beside him. Lamb regarded him respectfully as a gull much older than himself.

"How do you do," offered Lamb.

"What?" almost snarled the ancient.

"What?" repeated Lamb blankly.

"Yes," scolded the other. "How do I do what?"

"Oh, nothing!" replied Lamb. "I was just saying hello."

"You weren't saying hello," the old gull snapped. "If you'd said hello, I'd have heard, hello. You asked me how I done. Don't think I'm deaf."

"Did," corrected Mr. Lamb.

"See!" cried the gull. "You're wrong again. I always use done."

"Then you always say it wrong," said Lamb, his irritation getting the better of him. "You're an insufferable old fool and you don't know you're alive."

"There you go," retorted the other. "You're always wrong. If I wasn't alive I wouldn't be here."

"And I wouldn't miss you," replied Lamb.

"The sea is large," the old gull suggested. "Why don't you hop off?"

"I was here first," said Lamb.

"I'm always first wherever I am," his disagreeable companion announced. "And besides, you've drifted half a mile since you lit on the water, so you're not the first because you're not there any longer and I—"

"Oh, for God's sake," interrupted Lamb, "you win. Have it your own way."

"Of course I win," said the gull complacently. "I always win. I can argue you down on anything. Say something and I'll bet you're wrong."

Mr. Lamb made no reply. He abandoned the conversation as hopeless. Besides he did not care for the old gull's rasping voice. The sea was rough at this spot, and Lamb was beginning to feel far from well. The choppy motion of the waves was seriously disturbing the herring. He looked over to see how his companion was standing it. The old bird was stolidly bobbing up and down apparently lost in some exasperating line of thought.

"Do you ever get seasick?" Mr. Lamb ventured.

The gull looked up irascibly.

"Put it properly," he rasped. "If you mean, do I ever get sick from or because of the sea, my answer is no, certainly not. On the other hand, if you are trying to ask, do I ever get sick of the sea, then that's altogether different."

He paused and looked broodingly at the sky.

"I'm fed up with the sea," he continued. "I'd like to retire and settle down. Build a nice little nest somewhere—nothing

elaborate, you understand—and take life easy. I've been following the sea all my life and now I'm about through with it. I'd like to pass my few remaining years on shore. It's a dog's life for a gull."

"Why don't you retire?" asked Mr. Lamb. He was almost sorry for the old bird.

"Got to get my living, gotten I?" snapped the other.

"Haven't I," Mr. Lamb suggested mildly.

The old gull made an unpleasantly sarcastic noise.

"You're starting in again, I see," he observed with a hint of a threat in his voice. "I said 'gotten I,' and I mean 'gotten I.' No good trying to trip me up, I know."

Mr. Lamb once more relapsed into silence. There was nothing to be gained by arguing with this opinionated old bore. Time passed and the sun began to consider the Jersey hills. It had had a full day making the city sweat. Now it was time to close up shop. The old gull stirred and looked at Mr. Lamb.

"Want to go inshore and eat fertilizer?" he asked.

Mr. Lamb shuddered and clung to the herring.

"Thank you, no," he replied when he had a little mastered his nausea. "I've already dined."

"It's swell chow," said the old bird, "but suit yourself. More fertilizer for me. I love it."

He clapped his beak together with repulsive anticipation.

"Well, we'll probably run into each other sometime," he continued. "A big liner goes out tomorrow. Lots of first-class garbage. Probably see you with the mob. So long."

He rose from the water and streamed away inland. Lamb watched him out of sight.

"What an uncouth old devil," he mused.

That night when Sandra was undressing for bed she looked up from her garters and saw a large gull sitting on her window-sill.

"You low-down old loafer," she said, deliberately pulling down the shade. "And I was actually feeling sorry for you."

A loud, ribald squawk clattered in the air, but when she went to the window the gull was gone. She sat for a long time that night looking into the darkness.

Chapter XII. Mr. Billings Removes His Clothes

THE NEXT DAY MR. LAMB PUT TO SEA. IT WAS ENTIRELY UNexpected. One of those unplanned excursions that turn out so excellently.

He had been hanging about the three-mile limit all day, idly sniffing empty bottles and recalling his vision of Sandra; when along toward three o'clock a big liner came stepping swiftly on her way to Europe.

Mr. Lamb had never crossed. It was one of those things one promises oneself and keeps on promising until the tomb puts an end to the hoary illusion. He was fond of ships. He felt that he could do well on a ship. The only thing wrong with Europe was that his wife had been there. He was not so fond of Europe for this. It should have been out when she called.

He tagged along with a motley throng of gulls in the wake of the ship. His companions were greedy for garbage. He most disliked their squawks of disappointment and satisfaction. One little gull who, in spite of her frantic efforts, was getting almost nothing, he helped out. She appreciated the half-filled banana peel hugely, but immediately began making improper advances, and Lamb had the time of his life convincing her of his chastity. It was all new to her. She returned to the garbage a much puzzled bird. She was more hurt than annoyed.

Then Lamb boarded the ship. He was going to see for himself. With a stealth that was now well developed he slipped into the scuppers of the main deck and made his way forward to the smoking-room. From his point of vantage there were many legs—forests of legs. He averaged them up on his way and decided they were far from bad. Good, satisfactory legs, well-hosed and frankly displayed for all the world to admire. He thought of slave markets where women were sold nude, and he wondered why the pictures always showed them cringing. Why, just show these women a slave market, and they

would be racing to see who could strip first. Lamb was not a nice man. He did not think in nice ways. Mrs. Lamb had found that out.

His reception in the smoking-room was a great deal better than he had either hoped for or expected. The minute he thrust his serious, bespectacled head into the door a man in the corner began to laugh quietly to himself. From then on Lamb was a made gull so far as the smoking-room was concerned. He was accepted as one of the boys.

It all started from the man in the corner feeding him with bread soaked in wine. From then on things went from bad to worse. He was borrowed by various tables and urged to indulge. That is hardly correct. Lamb needed no urging. When a pretty woman held him in her arms and temptingly offered him a sip from her own cocktail he saw no reason to make a display of himself. He sipped and continued sipping. After dinner he did things with liqueurs. Exactly what he did with them he never quite remembered. However, a certain highball lingered long in his mind . . . that highball and a slanting deck, then an open door and a bed. Life became a comfortable hiatus.

When he next visited consciousness he was pecking irritably at a soft but firm object that was seriously disturbing his slumber. Several times beneath his pecking the object moved convulsively. Then suddenly the object was removed and the lights flashed on. When the coverings were pulled back, Lamb found himself frowning up into the face of a seriously perturbed young lady auspiciously attired. Now it so happened that this young lady had mastered only one cry of alarm that she considered suitable for shipboard. This cry she made all haste to utter.

Rushing from the room, she shouted at the top of her extremely robust lungs a warning that is feared and heeded on all the seven seas.

"Man overboard!" she announced with an earnestness that lent conviction. "Man overboard!"

The cry was automatically caught up by the stewards and passed forward to the bridge.

"Where?" demanded an officer, seizing the distracted young lady by a well-bared arm.

"Don't know," she half sobbed, "but I think it's in my bed. It bit me."

Too late now. The ship lost headway, then went into reverse. Doors popped open, and half-clad figures rushed to the decks, all of them cheerfully shouting something about a man being overboard. The scene was as giddy as a college rush.

During this refreshing interlude Mr. Lamb found an opportunity to remove himself to another stateroom, and to make sure there would be no misunderstanding this time he deliberately perched himself on the back of a chair.

"Well, that's doing pretty well for a mere seagull," he thought dreamily as he took up his sleep at the point where it had been disturbed.

Upon the bridge the skipper, when he learned the true state of affairs, was credited by his officers for inventing an entirely new language—something more concretely awful than they had ever heard before.

When the occupant of the stateroom Mr. Lamb had selected for the remainder of the night returned he glanced at the chair and averted his eyes. Then he rang for the steward.

"Steward," he asked when the man had arrived, "does there seem to be a bird on that chair in the corner?"

"There is, sir," replied the steward. "It's a seagull."

"Is the bird alive or dead?" continued the man.

The steward approached Mr. Lamb and scrutinized him closely. "He seems to be more asleep, sir," said the steward. "I'll chuck him right out."

"No," said the man. "No, steward. Let the damn fool sleep. I merely wanted to find out if we saw the same thing. I know exactly how he feels."

The steward withdrew, and the man, after a sympathetic survey of the gull, quietly prepared for sleep. He omitted dropping his shoes that night—a sleeping gull should not be aroused.

Mr. Lamb woke up a wreck. He had a confused memory of confusion. Impossible to put things together. He was sure,

however, that the skipper did not want him on the ship. As a matter of fact, when the skipper had received a fuller report of various happenings aboard his ship he had said, "Find the ——, —— gull and wring its ——, —— neck." Instinctively Mr. Lamb knew that the skipper would be just snooty enough to issue an order like that. Lamb had heard about skippers.

Therefore, with a parting look of interest at his cabin-mate, he hopped to an open porthole and abandoned ship. As he wheeled high in the heavens he saw smoke on the sky-line. Soon he was able to make out the lines of a ship heading in the opposite direction—New York bound.

"I guess I'll have to hitch-hike it," he decided, stumbling over an air pocket and almost losing his balance. "In my condition I could never make port on wing."

Before he finally left, however, he flew back to his own ship and secretively introduced himself into the skipper's quarters where he succeeded in arousing the weary man by patiently toying with his hair. Then at a safe distance, close to a porthole, the gull arranged himself and listened while the skipper made all the noise. Mr. Lamb wished he had a stenographer present to take down many of the wonderful words he heard. The skipper went into his parentage, dwelt on various irregularities of birth, and gave specific evidence showing that Lamb was a nameless, immoral scavenger of the sea, the scum of all feathered things. Then Mr. Lamb took up the burden of the conversation and cursed the skipper vilely but impartially, as only a seagull can.

The air was filled with a wild clattering sound. The skipper listened for a while to the cursing gull with truly professional interest, then relost his temper. There were a great number of bells in his room. The skipper rang them all. When practically the entire crew had been assembled the skipper gave it explicit instructions just what to do with the gull. To have done all the things the skipper commanded would have required a lot of gulls—one gull could never have lasted. Mr. Lamb waited politely until the man had exhausted his supply of unpleasant suggestions, then poising himself in the porthole, rebuked him roundly for his lack of self-control. The crew had

never heard the skipper so severely addressed. It was panic-stricken. It advanced on the cursing bird with extended hands. Lamb watched the determined men with an ironical eye, then dropped out of sight forever. After putting his crew on half-rations, the skipper cleared his cabin and returned to his bed, where he did not sleep.

When Lamb dropped down on the inbound vessel he dropped in a place where he would be free from intrusion, and there remained recuperating until the ship had passed the Battery. Then he sought the quiet waters of the Upper Hudson and drowsed peacefully round a battered old hulk until the lights began to appear in the windows of the apartment houses looming up high on the banks above him.

About five o'clock in the morning Mr. Lamb made up his mind that he was thoroughly sick of being a seagull. He had seen enough and done enough. If the little russet man insisted on his being things, Lamb wanted to be something else. He flew down Wall Street and turned into Broad Street. The financial district was deserted. Remarking that one of the windows of his office had been left open, he skimmed through it and sought his own private room. Everything was clean and in order. A large pile of slit envelopes was neatly stacked in the unfinished business basket. Perching himself on the edge of his desk, he closed his eyes to think and continued right through to sleep.

Time did not stay for Lamb's slumbers. It continued evenly about its business. The office staff made its appearance, and Billings, the treasurer, quietly entered Mr. Lamb's room. The old gentleman halted in the doorway and considered the sleeping gull long and thoughtfully. It was not his nature to be surprised. The moment he saw the gull his mind automatically leaped the events leading to its presence and occupied itself with devising schemes best fitted to relieve the office of its uninvited guest. Gulls did not buy bonds. Therefore gulls had no place in the scheme of things. It was all plain sailing to Billings.

He closed the door gently and returned to his desk the better to perfect his plans. This was a situation he had better handle

himself. The ejecting of a seagull from the chief's private office would be too much of a treat for the lamentably frivolous members of the staff. He selected a long basket designed to hold ticker tape and once more entered Mr. Lamb's office, closing the door behind him. He hoped the gull was still sleeping.

But the gull was not still sleeping. The gull was not there at all. In its place squatted Mr. Lamb on the extreme edge of his desk. Mr. Lamb was clad only in pajamas, and to Mr. Billings this fact was more to be regretted than the existence of Russia and the popularity of Al Smith. Those phenomena were inexplicable, but the conduct of his chief would have to be explained, and Billings greatly doubted if a satisfactory explanation could be found. He fervently thanked his God that there was no smell of liquor in the air. Mr. Lamb must have left the bottle outside. He had the sense at least to do that.

Billings was about to close the door and lock it, feeling it wiser to let his chief finish his sleep, when Mr. Lamb woke up and began to flap his arms against his sides in a singularly birdlike manner. Billings, remembering the gull, gasped as a shocking suspicion entered his mind. The flapping was the cause of more trouble. Mr. Lamb lost his balance and fell with a crash to the floor. The fall and the sight of the familiar face of his treasurer were sufficient to give Mr. Lamb a comprehensive realization of his predicament. He looked down at his pajamas, then smiled cordially up at Billings.

"Morning, Billings," he said. "Would you mind taking off your clothes. I have an extremely important engagement."

For only a moment did Billings hesitate, then he slowly began to strip. It was up to him to see that Mr. Lamb kept that engagement. A cool million might hang in the balance. Who could tell?

At this intimate juncture Miss Helen Wilson, bearing the morning letters, came swiftly into the office and, to the relief of both gentlemen, went swiftly out again. The expression on her face was enough to collect an interested group.

"The boss is in there in pajamas," she quietly told the girls, "and Billings is undressing."

"My Gord!" breathed a snappy-looking stenographer. "What do we all have to do, go to bed?"

A few minutes later Mr. Lamb, clad in a suit several sizes too small for him, came smilingly from his office and greeted his demoralized staff as if nothing unusual had occurred. And a few minutes after his departure Mr. Billings summoned his assistant to him and shortly appeared wearing a suit several sizes too large for him. With an air of deep preoccupation he flopped across the main office, then flopped from view behind the protection of his own door.

What steps the assistant took to cover his nakedness are not known. It is to be assumed that Mr. Billings did not permit him to go home in Mr. Lamb's pajamas.

When Lamb presented himself at his home his arrival created a small stir. Even Thomas was quietly edified. Mrs. Lamb was not amused.

"That's rather a dashing little ensemble you're wearing, major," Hebe observed, looking up from her plate. "Do you feel that we need to be diverted?"

"I sort of fancy it myself," said Lamb, taking his place at the head of the table. "It's Philadelphia's latest. Do you like it, Sapho?"

"Where have you been?" asked Sapho. "And what am I to understand by these mysterious disappearances?"

"Flying," said Mr. Lamb enigmatically; then as if it were an afterthought he asked: "Would it be quite convenient for me to retire to my room after luncheon? I want to save this suit for Sunday."

Mrs. Lamb refrained from asking further inconvenient questions. Her husband ate more than usual.

Chapter XIII. A Lapful of Sandy

"WHY MUST I BE CARRIED INTO THE CITY?" MR. LAMB COMplained, as his daughter spread disorder among the traffic in upper New York. "I just came from that wallow of vice and corruption."

"I'm going to spend money, I told you," his daughter patiently explained, "and I want you to watch how I do it. You see, major, at any moment now I might get married or something very closely related to getting married. From now on I've got to be always on the alert."

"There's an infinity of space between getting married and something very closely related to getting married," Mr. Lamb mildly observed. "Then of course there remains the relatively unimportant question of the morality of the thing."

"There you have me," replied Hebe. "I've always been backward on morals, but I do know how to dress appropriately for any given occasion, and that's more than half the battle."

"You may be right," her father agreed. "My own morals are undergoing a severe strain at present. They seem to be almost undermined, although thus far I am still intact. As a seagull I slept with a lady, but not very comfortably nor very long. I made an impression at that. It is a question in my mind if that lady ever sleeps again. She will certainly never sleep with a seagull."

Hebe parked the car in a side street and, taking her father's arm, directed his steps to a magnificent shop just off Fifth Avenue.

"This place is obviously not designed to improve one's morals," Mr. Lamb remarked as he looked about him. "I can hardly understand how a woman with such remarkable contraptions on underneath can refrain from discarding her outer garments and displaying herself demi-nude."

"All women cherish or have cherished that pious desire," Hebe replied wisely. "Your mind operates too crudely to understand the finer feelings of women. Anyway, here comes madam."

Madam having been introduced to Hebe's father and the young lady's wishes having been made known in a low voice, the couple were ushered into a private room and offered ridiculously inadequate gilt chairs.

"If you weren't my daughter," said Mr. Lamb, "I'd be leaving at just this point. What goes on here? The presence of

that sofa over there is not reassuring. Am I expected to ring for drinks?"

"I wouldn't have a mind like yours for the world," his daughter told him. "It's so utterly evil—so bad."

"Do you mean to sit there and tell me—," Mr. Lamb began, but he never finished the sentence.

The door opened and a girl clad in what Lamb considered next to nothing came slithering and swaying into the room. The girl was Sandra . . . impersonal, aloof, and unsmiling. Her eyes glittered dangerously, Mr. Lamb thought, when they occasionally met his.

"Get an eyeful you old roué," she gritted as she swept close to his chair.

Mr. Lamb started back.

"Hebe," he said, "I think I'd better be going. My morals as I have already told you are almost undermined."

"Is it not chic?" Madam demanded. "Is it not *ravissement*?"

While Hebe was agreeing with madam that the garment was both chic and *ravissement* Sandra once more glided past Mr. Lamb.

"Nasty," she muttered. "Nasty old man."

Mr. Lamb leaned close to his daughter and actually brought himself to whisper, so great was his indignation.

"She just called me a nasty old man," he told her. "You staged this party—not I."

Hebe patted her father's arm with a soothing little hand.

"Don't mind her," she replied in a low voice. "You are nasty, but you're not so very old."

"Well, I'll be damned," breathed Mr. Lamb, and fastened his eyes on the exact center of the rug.

"What do you think Mr. Lamb?" asked madam, fearing that the source of revenue might be growing bored. "Would not your daughter wear well in that?"

"What?" said Mr. Lamb with a slight start. "Wear well? Oh yes, of course. She'd wear splendidly if she didn't wear out altogether."

"Your father is droll," laughed madam. "Come, I have

something to show—," and taking Hebe by the arm, she led the girl from the room.

"*Un moment, monsieur,*" drifted back to him through the closing door.

Then things began to happen. When the click of the latch assured Sandra that she was alone in the room with Mr. Lamb, she took instant advantage of their privacy. With one spring she was on his lap, her arms twined tightly round his head. To Mr. Lamb it seemed that Sandra's unexpected demonstration was more in the nature of an assault than an expression of tender emotions. Suppose he should be discovered in this compromising position? Lamb grew frantic.

"Get up," he mouthed, his vowels being muffled by a quantity of ineffectual lace. "Get up at once—this instant!"

Then madam and Hebe made their appearance. Madam uttered a shocked cry and covered her eyes, but Hebe studied the situation with her usual detached interest.

Sandra wriggled off the knees and took refuge behind madam.

"It was a veritable assault, madam," she chattered with every appearance of terror. "The moment you left the room that nasty old man on the chair looked at me and said, 'I'm going to get you,' and with that I was seized—you saw."

She embellished this lying statement with a volley of extremely convincing sobs and shudders. Madam put her arms around the girl and did her best to quiet her maidenly alarm.

"Let me explain," Lamb began, but Hebe interrupted.

"Madam," said she, "I think I'll take several sets of that small thing she's wearing."

Madam was delighted. She even regarded Mr. Lamb with sympathetic eyes.

Mr. Lamb walked out of the shop and allowed Hebe to guide his faltering steps at random.

Hebe knew of a place and thither she led her father. For the remainder of the afternoon she dutifully fed him highballs until his belief in the ultimate wisdom of God was partially restored. He was even able to smile ruefully over the memory of Sandra's assault.

At a late hour that night he was still drinking highballs and running up a commendable check at a night club for the benefit of Sandra, his daughter, and Melville Long. Mr. Lamb had danced with more diligence than grace. Now, however, he was past dancing. In fact, if the truth must be known, Mr. Lamb was rapidly disappearing, the top of his head being level with the table cloth, and in a few minutes even the little of him with which he saw fit to grace the table was withdrawn from public view.

Observing the reluctance of her father to remain in an erect position, Hebe called the waiter and asked for the check. Presently he returned with a beaming face in anticipation of a heavy tip, but as he was on the point of proffering the final reckoning he suddenly became transfixed in his tracks, his eyes riveted themselves on the floor, and the beam slowly melted from his face giving place to an expression decidedly unnerving to behold. The party looked down and saw what the waiter saw—a long, large, tawny tail protruding from under the table. The waiter felt sure that even to look at such a thing was not included in his salary. He tiptoed away carrying the check with him. Let more intrepid spirits collect it if they could. His duty lay with his family.

The two girls looked at the one remaining man, who himself was not so crisp.

"What's on the other end of it?" asked Sandra.

Hebe bent over and thoughtfully contemplated the tail.

"Search me," she said at last, "I don't rightly remember ever having had any dealings with a tail like that before."

"Perhaps it's an altogether new and better animal," Mr. Long suggested enterprisingly.

He pulled a flask from his hip pocket and passed it to the ladies. The situation called for a drink.

"That," said Hebe, sweeping the back of her hand across her mouth, "endears you to me for life."

At this moment Mr. Lamb decided to relieve the tension of the situation. A long, sleek head with a pointed snout appeared above the table, slid onto the rumpled cloth and looked moistly at the three young people. In the due course of time the head

was followed by a body, which slumped back awkwardly in its chair.

"I don't want to be hasty," said Hebe, "but roughly speaking, I think my father and our host leans toward kangaroo. What will we use for money now that he has gone?"

Once more Mr. Long was enterprising.

"Mightn't he have a pouch?" he asked. "I seem to remember something about kangaroos and pouches."

The kangaroo laughed foolishly and beat on the table with his short but powerful forelegs. Hebe cast her lover a smile of infinite commiseration.

"For one I'd prefer not to look for it," she remarked. "You see, darling, he's not that sort of a kangaroo."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Long. "It was merely a suggestion."

"Rather an indelicate one," observed the girl.

For some minutes Sandra had been looking with growing disgust at the obviously inebriated kangaroo, who had been fatuously crying to hold her hand.

"Now, I ask you," she demanded. "What are we going to do with that? You just can't leave a kangaroo to shift for himself in a city like this."

"He'd be safe so far as women are concerned," observed Melville Long, surpassing himself in optimism.

The kangaroo received this remark with a giggle of appreciation.

"I don't know," said Hebe. "He's not such a bad-looking kangaroo."

"He's a terrible-looking kangaroo," declared Sandra. "Look at him there, all slouched over. Why can't he sit up properly?"

Mr. Lamb favored her with a scowl.

It seems unfortunate that at this stage of the conversation a gentleman in executing an ambitious dance step should have descended heavily on Mr. Lamb's tail. It seems doubly unfortunate that Mr. Lamb had not sufficient restraint to withhold the vicious upper cut he immediately delivered upon the point of the gentleman's chin. From that time on everything seemed increasingly unfortunate.

The dancer retaliated with a left hook to Mr. Lamb's jaw, and Sandra, as if guided by an infallible sense of balance, sprang upon the man's partner and partially disrobed her.

"Touch a hair of his head," she shouted, "and I'll strip you clean."

Several ladies rushed to the assistance of the assaulted woman, and this quite naturally brought Hebe into the fray. One thing led to another, and presently Melville Long found himself engaged in biting the ear of a perfect stranger while kicking another diligently in the stomach. On all sides it was an earnest, hard-breathing little engagement that did not lose one whit of interest because of the fact that only a few of its participants had the vaguest idea of what it was all about.

In the meantime the kangeroo, highly excited by all that was going on, was leaping from table to table and impartially smiting both friend and foe whenever the occasion offered.

The room was not quiet nor the scene restful. Several men, as if preferring not to trust the evidence of their eyes, were sitting motionless at their tables, their heads buried in their arms. When Mr. Lamb's head managed to get itself through a snare drum, retaining the frame round his neck, it seemed high time to think about going home.

Hebe, Sandra, and a shockingly tattered Mr. Long cut a path through the whirling mass and joined the kangaroo at the door.

"Cut and run!" cried Sandra. "The car's round the corner."

The four of them burst so compactly from the place that two arriving policemen were heavily borne to the pavement. There they sat and blew their whistles, then lurched in the direction of the flying wedge. They were trailed by a waiter wildly waving a check.

"Off again," thought Lamb to himself, as he leaped along beside Sandra. "My universe of late seems to be in a disconcertingly unsettled condition."

As they swarmed into the automobile a motorcycle policeman came into view and calmly took the number of the car, which by this time was gathering speed, then with a satisfied

grin, settled himself down on his machine to show these people exactly where they got off.

At Columbus Circle another officer tried to hold them up when they were forced to slow down in traffic, but a hairy arm shooting out unexpectedly from the rear seat of the car, landed him in the gutter.

"What sort of a mob is that?" he wondered, vividly recalling the strange-looking arm that had so bewilderingly altered his plans.

Melville Long was at the wheel, and Hebe was sitting beside him. On the back seat Sandra was clinging to the kangaroo and laughing softly at the festive appearance he made with the rim of the drum round his neck.

When they were well out of the city the motorcycle policeman, who had not forgotten them for a moment, telephoned ahead to the next fair-sized town and gave full particulars and an adequate description of the merry little party. They were all laughing now, save Mr. Lamb, who showed a strong inclination to doze off on Sandra's shoulder. Melville Long's merriment was the greater because of the skilful manner in which he believed he had eluded pursuit.

The flight came to an end at the railroad tracks of the next town. The bars were down, and it was here that the reception committee waited.

"Damn," said Melville Long under his breath as several dark figures emerged from the shadows and manifested their presence in other unpleasant ways.

"You big stiffs," said Hebe. "Why didn't you call out the army?"

"That's all they are," agreed Sandra unhesitatingly. "They're just great, big, liver-footed stiffs—morons!"

"That talk ain't going to help you a bit," one of the officers warned the ladies.

"Aw, shut up," said Mr. Long. "We're not asking you for a lesson in polite conversation."

The officer was about to attend to the young man for this remark, when a terrible, grinning face was suddenly thrust into his. He started back with a cry and had to be supported by

two of his brother officers. But this was Mr. Lamb's last effort that night. He had no recollection of being driven to a station house and half carried to a cell in which he was locked up in company with his prospective son-in-law. The two girls, still busily insulting every uniform in sight, were given a barred apartment of their own where they sang and jeered themselves to sleep.

When Judge Gibson arose next morning he made up his mind to give all prisoners brought before him whom he could not sentence to painful death at least a life term at revolting labor. In this cheerful frame of mind he repaired to his court and proceeded to spread dread and dismay among the ranks of evil-doers. When Sandra, Hebe and Melville Long were lined up against the rail he kept them waiting a considerable time before he looked up from a paper he had been studying with growing interest. When he did look up his expression was almost happy. Here was something he could get thoroughly enraged about. Convulsing his face into a small bunch he slowly considered in turn each youthful face looking bravely up into his.

"Good morning," he said in a suspiciously pleasant voice. "Can you think of anything you haven't done?"

"Rape," replied Sandra promptly.

"Arson and pillage," added Hebe.

"Treason," was the best that Long could achieve.

The Judge was a little taken back by the nature of the snappy replies. Evidently these young people were not so soft as they looked. He would have to deal with them astutely.

"Well, I have you down here for about everything else," he continued, referring to the paper. "I'll select a few charges at random just to give you an approximate idea of how very long you are going to be with us."

He cleared his throat efficiently and carefully adjusted his glasses.

"A mention is made here of driving while under the influence of spirituous liquor, of demolishing a restaurant and refusing to pay the check, of assaulting, maiming, and wounding upwards of half a hundred innocent persons, of speeding and vio-

lating every known traffic regulation in the most flagrant and callous manner, of having in your company and possession a dangerous wild beast, of attacking several officers of the law, and of being in possession of a flask of whisky. Your evening seems to have been industriously spent in disturbing the world at large."

"I'll bet you love to read the weather reports that say 'Rain and increasing cold,' " observed Sandra with her most disarming smile.

The judge was not annoyed. He looked at the girl a long time as if trying to fix her image forever in his memory.

"Where you are going," he told her distinctly, "you won't have to worry about the weather. It will be all overcast to you."

In spite of herself Sandra shuddered at this unemotional announcement.

"Your honor," put in one of the policemen. "They also used bad language and called us a bunch of big stiffs."

The judge looked at the policeman with a shocked expression, then turned his eyes to the prisoners.

"How did you find that out?" he asked.

"You can see for yourself, your honor," replied Hebe.

"I know," agreed the judge, "but we've been trying to hush it up. Don't go giving us away every time you get run in."

The judge paused and once more considered the document.

"It refers here," he continued with a new note of interest in his voice, "to a dangerous wild beast. Where is this wild beast at present, Donovan?"

"He's locked up," replied that worthy.

"Did you capture it last night?" asked the judge.

"The four of us, your honor," said Donovan modestly. "Officers O'Boyle, Burk—"

"Quite right," the judge interrupted. "Then I assume the beast was neither dangerous nor wild."

"It gave us a terrible start, your honor," Donovan got in. "An awful sight it was with the drum around its neck, and all."

The judge looked up quickly. This was all news to him.

"It must have been dreadful," he remarked with elaborate

solicitude. "But what's this about a drum? It says nothing here about a drum."

"Yes, sir, it was wearing a drum," said Donovan.

"And you say this drum was around the neck of this alleged wild beast?" continued Judge Gibson. "What sort of wild beast does it happen to be?"

"The doctor just came in on a case, sir, and claims it's a kingaroo," the officer replied.

"Kangaroo, Donovan," corrected the judge.

"Yes, your honor," Donovan continued, "but Sergeant Brophy says it ain't a kingaroo, because kingaroos don't act that way."

"In what lies the eccentricity of this unknown wild beast's behavior?" demanded the judge now thoroughly interested.

"Didn't get your honor," said Donovan.

"What's wrong with the thing?" snapped the judge, then turning to his prisoners added politely, "You'll pardon me I hope before I put you away. I must get Donovan to tell me all about this kingaroo."

"Certainly, your honor, we'll pardon you if you will pardon us," replied Hebe.

"Very good," said the judge with a ghastly grin. "You were going to say, Donovan?"

"I hadn't intended saying anything," replied Donovan.

"Well, go right ahead and say it," urged the judge patiently. "I think you can confide in us. What's wrong with this wild beast?"

"Well, your honor," replied the officer with every sign of hesitancy. "The last I saw of the thing it was humming 'Me and My Shadow' and dancing around in its cell."

"What!" the judge almost shouted, leaning far over his desk; then, sinking back, he added, "Don't say any more for a moment, Donovan. I need to think."

The prisoners before him were leaning on the rail, their faces hidden from view.

"I wish I could laugh," said the judge gloomily. "Never have I been forced to listen to such an involved and successfully obscured narrative."

He picked up a newspaper and read for several minutes, occasionally stopping to look penetratingly at Donovan until that intrepid limb of the law began to grow more than a little reflective.

"What did you say the name of that song was?" the judge asked at last.

" 'Me and My Shadow,' " Donovan replied.

"Is it a pretty song?" continued the judge. "Do you know it?"

"I couldn't sing it myself, your honor," said Donovan, fearing the judge's next request, "but I know it when I hear it."

"I'll buy you a record, your honor," offered Sandy. "It's sweetly wistful like so many of your clients."

"You won't be near any store," said the judge.

"Oh," said Sandy, "that's too bad!"

"Sounds like a criminal record," observed the judge. " 'Me and My Shadow'—shadow, you see. Good! Everyone gets 100 but Officer Donovan."

The judge folded his papers with a snap and sat up abruptly.

"Enough of this," he said briskly. "Donovan, bring in that singing kangaroo. Let's all have a look at it. Perhaps we'll be able to agree on a name."

"He's not such a poisonous judge," murmured Hebe to Sandra.

"Not at all," said Sandra. "Quite a human being."

"Wait till you see what he does with us," Melville Long whispered behind his hand, his optimism vanished.

The kangaroo was not entirely sober when Donovan, holding a rope, the other end of which was secured around his neck, brought him before the judge. The animal covered the ground with a peculiar gliding motion that gave him the appearance of skating. He was still humming under his breath in a preoccupied manner. Greeting his friends with a casual wave of a relatively short foreleg, he bowed to the judge.

At this point several sleepy reporters came back to life and began to ask each other questions. Here was a good story. They collared an attendant and obtained full details. The few remaining spectators also displayed signs of returning interest.

The judge leaned forward and listened intently, one hand held up for silence. A strange noise was issuing from the kangaroo's lips. Observing the judge's strained attitude the kangaroo obligingly increased the volume of his humming, and the room was filled with what the kangaroo fondly believed to be a song.

"You've a better ear for music than I have, Donovan," said the judge, settling back in his chair. "Is he still harping on his favorite song?"

"That's what he thinks he's doing," answered the officer. "It ain't so bad, your honor, considering he's a poor, dumb, soulless beast."

Mr. Lamb looked pensively at Donovan.

"Where's his drum?" asked the judge suddenly.

"He refused to come out of his cell until I'd taken it off for him," Donovan replied.

"Too bad," observed the judge. "I'd like to have seen that." Then turning to Hebe, he asked, "Miss Lamb, where did you get this singing kangaroo?"

"My uncle found him in the bush," said Hebe.

"What bush?" asked the judge. "Try to be specific."

"The Australian bush," replied Hebe. "He's been in our family ever since he was a pup."

The judge continued to question the girl about the kangaroo until Mr. Lamb grew bored. He was also becoming extremely sleepy. The liquor was wearing off. Slowly he sank down and fell into a gentle slumber. The judge looked over the edge of his desk.

"Donovan," he ordered, "wake that kangaroo up. Neither man nor beast sleeps in this court."

A violent jerk on the noose brought the kangaroo erect like a released spring. He made a side swipe at Donovan, but, luckily for that officer, failed to land. Then, as if suddenly realizing his surroundings, he looked apologetically at the judge.

A strange feeling was taking possession of Mr. Lamb, a feeling not entirely due to his overindulgence. Some sort of chemical revolution was taking place within him. He was unable to shake off his drowsiness and confusion. As he drifted

off to sleep again he had a vague idea that the judge was asking Donovan whether the poor soulless beast had been given a cup of coffee that morning.

A loud discussion in the back of the courtroom between two heavy-faced, unhatted ladies stoutly defending the smirched reputation of their respective husbands presently to be tried on a charge of jointly attempting to put an end to each other's lurid careers, created a momentary diversion. All eyes were turned in their direction, and by the time the belligerent ladies had been voluminously ejected, another diversion had arisen to mar the tranquillity of the judge's morning. When he next peered at the kangaroo he found himself looking into the dark eyes of a tall, fashionably clad gentleman of distinguished manner and sober bearing.

"Hello!" exclaimed the judge in some surprise. "Where the devil did you spring from?"

Mr. Lamb presented his card and explained his presence in the court. Having learned indirectly about the escapade of these young people and being the father of one of them and an old friend of the parents of the other two, he had hastened to help the judge to show them the error of their ways.

"You are just in time to see the last of them, Mr. Lamb," Judge Gibson informed him. "And by the way, how did you manage to get that noose about your neck?"

Mr. Lamb's hand flew to the rope. For a moment he appeared to be crushed. His companion of the night gazed at him with dismayed eyes. How could he lie himself out of this? Then a bland smile touched Mr. Lamb's lips as he looked up at the judge.

"I just found it lying there on the floor," said Mr. Lamb, "and I thought I'd try it on."

"Are you in the habit of trying on nooses?" asked the judge.

Sandra was leaning against Mr. Lamb. Her face was crimson, and a handkerchief was crammed in her mouth.

"That's the most deflated lie I've ever attended," breathed Hebe.

"No," replied Mr. Lamb in reply to the judge's question. "It is not one of my hobbies."

"I'm glad to hear it," the judge remarked. "One of the nooses might stay put sometime."

Mr. Lamb laughed politely.

"Donovan," continued the judge, "where has that kangaroo gotten himself to? Is he still sleeping or what's he think he's doing?"

When the judge's eye gathered in Donovan, he imagined the officer was giving every appearance of shell shock. Donovan was staring at Mr. Lamb with frightened bewildered eyes.

"Why, that gentleman's the kangaroo!" he faltered. "The rope ain't never been out of my hand, your honor."

"No, Donovan," replied the judge. "Mr. Lamb is not a kangaroo in spite of his eccentric conduct. You've tried to convince me of many strange, unbelievable stories in the course of our relations, but I refuse to be convinced that this gentleman is a kangaroo."

A hard light came into the judge's eyes, and he leaned far over his desk again.

"Now, Donovan," he rasped. "You go out and find me that kangaroo. Take some of your fellow incompetents with you. Bring that animal back to me. I want him to teach me that song."

"I beg your pardon, Judge Gibson," Mr. Lamb put in, "but I think I can help the officer out. As I was coming in a kangaroo burst from between two excited women who were evidently being put out. The creature almost knocked me over in his eagerness to go somewhere. He turned to the left and jumped into a passing van heading away from the city. That's the last I saw of him."

"Search for that van, Donovan," said the judge. "And don't forget to beat every bush. He likes bushes. So far it seems you've made a mess of the case. There's not a witness here in court to support a number of your charges. I don't even see a plaintiff."

Donovan left with one last fascinated look at Mr. Lamb, who immediately after retired with the judge to his private chamber. When he returned he smiled encouragingly at the

delinquents. The judge brushing his lips with a handkerchief also smiled upon them.

"What your various parents are going to do to you will be plenty," he said happily. "You will come to wish I had put you in prison forever. I've just had Mr. Long on the wire, young man, and he actually pleaded with me to sentence you for life. He said something about being able to prove yourself in jail. In view of the approaching unpleasantness I am letting you off with a suspended sentence. Get them out of my sight, Mr. Lamb. They've taken up my entire morning—they and that kangaroo."

Back in the automobile Lamb collapsed. Sandra nestled against him.

"I hope this will teach us all a lesson," he said piously. "It will all come out in the papers."

" 'Twill make erotic reading for Sapho," replied Hebe. "I think we had better go away somewhere."

"I know I had," said Long moodily. "There'll be no living at home. I've proved myself conclusively at last."

"Ruination?" suggested Hebe.

"We're ruinated enough as it is," said Long.

Sandra's hand crept in to Mr. Lamb's.

"You're such a nice, long, lovely liar," she murmured.

Mr. Lamb was looking at her ear.

"That thing," he said, pinching it slightly, "was the start of all my troubles."

"Kiss it," urged Sandra in a low voice.

Mr. Lamb looked coldly at the girl.

Chapter XIV. Sapho Tries to Murder a Fish

MR. LAMB HAD SPOKEN CONSERVATIVELY. THE REPORTERS GOT it. The papers printed it. Yards of it. In spite of the vast multiplicity of detail, in spite of the unscrupulous embellishments, the callous innuendoes, the gentlemen of the press were still heavily befogged as to the actual facts of the affair. Mr.

Lamb appeared in print, but not in his true rôle of a converted kangaroo.

One story in particular disturbed the overtaxed equanimity of its central character. The author of the story in question had seen fit to treat his subject facetiously, which when one comes to consider its nature seems about the best way to treat it. One can hardly work up a spirit of profound indignation or grow morbidly melancholic over a humming kangaroo. A few morons exist who perhaps could, but these single-minded gentlemen were, as usual, too busy suppressing books, collecting unpleasantly reminiscent picture postcards or putting disturbing factors behind the bars to worry about Mr. Lamb and his companions.

Nevertheless, Mr. Lamb would have wrung this individual reporter's neck quite cheerfully and thoroughly had the neck conveniently offered itself. However, the necks of reporters are not always the easiest things in the world to establish contact with, save through the medium of a bottle containing any fluid remotely alcoholic including varnish and rub-down preparations.

Sitting this evening in the quietude of his study with his old friend Kai Lung safely balanced on one long, thin knee, Mr. Lamb delayed for a moment the pleasure of having this engaging Oriental unroll his mat in order to peruse for the fifth time the far less engaging inventions of some obviously depraved occidental newspaper reporter.

These inventions were in part as follows:

THE STRANGE BEHAVIOR OF
MR. T. LAWRENCE LAMB

APPEARS IN COURT WITH A NOOSE
ROUND HIS NECK

JUDGE GIBSON REFUSES TO HANG HIM

Apparently anticipating the worst, Mr. T. Lawrence Lamb of Woodbine, N. Y., a well-known and, just previous to this writing, conservative investment banker,

presented himself before Judge Gibson in general session today with a noose neatly arranged round his neck—this in addition to a tie of unusually lurid color.

In full justice to Mr. Lamb it must be stated that his appearance in court was due to no moral lapse of his own. One can only ascribe Mr. Lamb's unconventional neck adornment to a desire to offer himself in vicarious atonement for the sins of his daughter, Miss Hebe Lamb, and her two accomplices, Miss Sandra Rush and Mr. Melville Long, all active members of Woodbine's younger set.

That these young people were a little more than active on the evening of their arrest and subsequent incarceration is evidenced by the fact that no less than fourteen serious charges were lodged against them and that their trail of destruction extended from the dead center of New York's night-club district to a spot some forty miles distant from the city.

Additional interest is added to the mad progress of these young people through the presence of a singing kangaroo, or, as Officer Patrick Donovan prefers to call it, kingaroo. Whether this convivial animal was a kangaroo or a kingaroo is difficult to establish at this moment, due to the unfortunate fact that whatever the creature was it successfully thwarted retention and is still at large. According to Judge Gibson it is probably in some bush. The judge never offers an opinion without some good reason.

An element of mystery is introduced here arising from the inexplicable coincidence that the noose so unsuccessfully used to restrain this night-club-loving animal was the identical one that so nattily adorned Mr. Lamb's neck.

Mr. Lamb has stated that finding the noose on the floor he picked it up and slipped it on merely through lack of knowing anything better to do with it. To his way of thinking, a noose obviously required a neck, and not wishing to intrude upon the neck of some perfect stranger, he quite logically put it on his own.

In view of the gentleman's social position and well-established conservative leanings, this is an explanation

difficult to believe. It can only be assumed that Mr. Lamb's mind suddenly broke down under the shock of his daughter's conduct and that temporarily the man was not anyway near himself.

Evidently this was the charitable view that Judge Gibson took of the situation, having been somewhat shocked himself by the sudden appearance of an otherwise normal gentleman wearing a noose round his neck, and to all intents and purposes willing to pay the supreme penalty for his erring daughter and her no less erring friends.

Apparently the sight of Mr. Lamb, together with the sincerity of his bearing, touched some hitherto successfully concealed spring of tenderness in the judge, who released the youthful offenders on a suspended sentence after what is believed to have been a pleasant conversation in his chambers with the sacrificial Mr. Lamb.

Miss Sandra Rush, an underwear model of no mean proportions, is often seen in one of the many Lamb automobiles. This is, of course, due solely to her close friendship with Mr. Lamb's daughter. The singing kangaroo, it is believed, is still caroling his ribald songs in some secluded bush.

It was on this high note that the story came to an end. It was also as this note sounded that Mrs. Lamb entered her husband's study. Once entered, she stood still and tragically awaited his acknowledgment of her presence. Fearing that the acknowledgment might be indefinitely delayed, she altered her pose at last and slanted an accusing finger at the newspaper now drooping from Mr. Lamb's hands.

"What are you going to do about it?" dropped gloomily from her lips. "I suggest you resign from everything and live somewhere else under an assumed name."

Mr. Lamb elevated his knees, skilfully retaining control of Kai Lung, and looked at his wife as if he were trying to place her in an extremely feeble memory. Presently he unlimbered, rose and vaguely offered her a chair which she in turn spurned, overacting the part in doing so.

"Ah yes!" murmured Mr. Lamb. "It's Sapho—my Tilly. You were saying? . . ."

"I was saying," Sapho put in, "that you should drop out of sight and live under another name."

"Couldn't I grow a beard?" Mr. Lamb asked mildly. "I might even dye my hair and continue to lurk here as one of your inspired friends or a conveniently acquired uncle from Australia. They say here in the paper that the kangaroo or kingaroo—I prefer the latter version—came from the bush. And to think that we both shared the same noose. This paper also says that he sang. I missed that part. Can't have everything, I suppose. Do you believe he actually sang, that kangaroo?"

"You should go to your underwear model or to your own daughter for such information," was Mrs. Lamb's crushing retort. "The light attitude you are now assuming seems in the worst of taste to me. Once more I ask you, what are you going to do about it? I cannot afford to be associated with a laughing-stock. My life—what modest talent I possess—was never intended to be shackled to a personality so—so coarse and unsympathetic as yours . . . so utterly self-centered and lacking in the finer shades and vibrations of emotion. My life should be led with a larger, a higher vision. Everyone recognizes that fact."

"The word that I have in mind," said Mr. Lamb slowly, "the only one I consider a fitting reply to your bathetic remarks, is frequently applied to wives by less delicate husbands than I. It's too honest a word for your ears, so I'll let you exercise your limited imagination. Consider the word as said."

He looked thoughtfully at some cigarette ashes that had fallen on his left knee, started to brush them off, then deciding the effort was too exhausting, gave it up.

"Still there is something in what you say," he remarked at last. "That Vacation Fund affair, from what I heard of it, provided enough laughter to last this community for years. If both of us become laughing-stocks the general merriment might provoke an epidemic of hysteria."

"I absolutely deny I was a laughing-stock," said Mrs. Lamb.

"A horse was responsible for all that . . . a low, vicious, yet strangely human horse in some of its more objectionable actions. In many ways that brute of a horse reminded me of you. Even now I shudder when I think of him."

"Another point I share in common with this horse of yours." Mr. Lamb grinned good-naturedly.

"I did not come here to discuss my emotional reactions to you," Mrs. Lamb answered coldly. "I hoped that we might be able to arrive at some understanding—some civilized arrangement. Since the appearance of all this scandal in the papers my nerves have been uprooted. It will take years to get them anyway near back to their former condition. They'll never get back entirely. You don't know what a thing like that does to me."

Mr. Lamb, still grinning, seemed to be considering things. His wife did not care for the grin. She recognized it. Also the light in his eyes. Something particularly disagreeable always followed these facial manifestations. She was not disappointed. Something unpleasant did—something surpassingly disagreeable, a real accomplishment for Mr. Lamb.

"Here's an idea," he said quite seriously. "Suppose I should give you the use of my room over week-ends? What would you think of a clubby little scheme like that? Sort of ménage à trois, one member being absent. . . . I have a little pride."

Mrs. Lamb did not express an opinion of her husband's little scheme. She did not even deign to meet Mr. Lamb's eyes. The mental process of this crude man was altogether too antiquated to deal with the complex sex impulses of a modern woman of genius. In bringing up that phase of the situation he was once again displaying execrable taste. She had come to his study to discuss his affairs, not hers. She was her own woman, but now since the newspapers had published such full reports of his actions in court, his affairs were public property.

"A long week-end," she heard Mr. Lamb urging. "From Friday to Monday night. How about it, Tilly?"

She turned to the door, fully intending to go through it, when Mr. Lamb's voice recalled her.

"I have one more suggestion to make," he said. "Suppose I

should retire from business and write a book entitled 'Wild Animals I Have Been'?"

This suggestion was sufficiently arresting to move Mrs. Lamb to change her mind and to accept the once rejected chair. Arranging herself becomingly she regarded her husband with what she fondly believed to be a disarming smile.

"Then you have been animals," she remarked conversationally. "How interesting! Tell me all about it. I knew you were that horse of course, and I suspected you of being the bird, although I never saw it, or rather you. Were you also the kangaroo?"

"Why this sudden interest in animals?" asked Mr. Lamb. "I never noticed it before save perhaps in the worn-out dishmop you occasionally defile our presence with—that snug harbor for jaded fleas. And suppose I should admit I turned into animals and things, I dare say you'd keep my guilty secret from the entire world with the possible exception of the law courts and a select multitude of your strolling players. You'd love to see me arrested as an escaped kangaroo. Your present mood of sweet confidence—wifely interest—amuses me."

With a burst of determination Mr. Lamb brushed the ashes off his knee, spilled some more on his vest and continued.

"Well, strange as it may seem," he said, "I'm going to tell you right here and now to your exceedingly false face that recently I have acquired the habit of turning into animals, both wild and domestic. At this very moment I might become some extremely deadly reptile and do you in with fangs filled with horrid poison. I wouldn't squeeze you to death because even snakes have some self-respect. Frankly I'd like to fang you. I feel like doing it, but unfortunately the choice does not lie with me. I might become a panther instead of an anteater or a rat or a butterfly—God knows what I might become."

Lamb paused and regarded his wife darkly. She was not a thing of beauty. Terror failed to improve the arrangement of her features. Standing in the doorway she returned his gaze with eyes of glass, so fixed and polished was the expression in them.

"I'm taking the trouble to tell you all this," Mr. Lamb went

on evenly, as he followed her into the dining-room, "because I don't give one shrill hoot in hell how you spread the news. No one would believe you anyway. You'd only be making a bigger fool of yourself than you have already, if such an enormous achievement is possible—which I very much doubt."

Mr. Lamb was thoroughly aroused now. For so many excellent reasons he found himself weary of this woman and all her false standards of life. He was standing by the goldfish aquarium looking down absently at its four occupants, three fish and one diminutive but aged turtle.

"Doesn't that damned old turtle ever budge himself?" his subconscious mind was asking, while quite consciously he continued deliberately on with his wife.

"And here's another thing to worry about," he heard himself saying. "It's highly possible for me to return home some morning in the early hours in the guise of a famished tiger, an undernourished wolf, a man-eating shark, a wild boar, a—a—" He paused to give himself time to think of some particularly disagreeable animal. "—a crocodile," he resumed triumphantly. "And if that frail lily of yours should chance to be in my bed I'd gnash him up like that and gladly pay for the subsequent nausea his presence in my belly would cause me. How'd you like to come vamping into my room in that decrepit way of yours to find all that remained of Mr. Gray was only a couple of corns dangling between my jaws? A pretty picture? But a possible one, and you'd be responsible for the death of the Woodbine Players' worst actor just as sure as I'm standing here."

The picture of Leonard Gray's corns dangling between the dripping jaws of a crocodile proved too much for Mrs. Lamb. She turned her back upon her terrifying husband and covered her face with her hands. A sudden liquid plop startled her into reversing her position. Mr. Lamb was no longer there. Amazingly, the potential crocodile had vanished. His last words, she remembered, had been, "just as sure as I'm standing here," but the man was not standing there, and Mrs. Lamb seriously doubted if he ever had stood there.

The confused woman was about to hurry from the room

when her eyes were drawn to the aquarium where a fourth and larger goldfish was chasing the other three round the tank in frantic circles.

Recalling the liquid plop she had heard, Mrs. Lamb slowly and thoughtfully left the room. A sweet, womanly little plan was buzzing in her mind. As she prepared herself for bed she wondered idly how Lady Macbeth undressed while engaged in perfecting one of her many dirty tricks.

While this dramatic disrobing was in progress Mr. Lamb, with an exasperated nose, was busily budging the turtle over the floor of the aquarium. When the little russet man had taken a sudden fancy to change him into a goldfish there still had been a number of things on Mr. Lamb's mind he had wanted to say to his wife. Now he was taking his irritation out on the turtle.

"Never thought of a goldfish," Lamb said to himself. "From a crocodile to one of these made-up sardines. . . . What a let-down!"

He gave the turtle an especially vicious budge.

"Get a move on," he muttered. "Shake a leg, you old scow. Show us what you look like inside. Out with your head."

After many disturbing budges, the ancient turtle protruded his neck and, looking resentfully at Mr. Lamb, gave utterance to the equivalent of:

"What in hell, may I ask, do you think you're trying to do with me? This is a private home. Flip on."

"I won't flip on," replied Lamb. "And I'm going to budge you to my heart's content. Are you so confounded thick-shelled you don't know when you're being budged?"

"I know when I'm being budged, all right," retorted the turtle, "and I know when I'm not being budged, but what I don't know is what purpose all this budging is going to serve. I never have dealings with goldfish. We're not on the same level."

"No," replied Lamb, "you're on the lower level."

"Not low enough for you," said the turtle.

"You should be delighted I even budge you," answered Mr. Lamb.

"I'm not delighted," said the turtle. "And I hate ostentation."

"I'm only a goldfish pro tem," offered Mr. Lamb. "Tomorrow I may be a zebra."

"There's no such thing as a zebra," the turtle retorted. "It's all a lie—the whole sordid story."

This fruitless conversation did not serve to restore Mr. Lamb's good humor. The turtle, he decided was just about as opinionated and ignorant as the seagull who had so revoltingly invited him to eat fertilizer.

"Don't make a display of your vast ignorance," said Mr. Lamb. "I myself have seen any number of zebras."

"Show me only one," challenged the turtle.

"There aren't any zebras here," replied Mr. Lamb.

"That proves it," said the turtle with a nasty laugh. "That makes a liar of you. The first thing I know you'll be trying to tell me there's such a thing as a lion."

"Got you!" cried Lamb exultantly. "If there aren't any lions, how did you know their name?"

"I didn't say I did," replied the turtle. "Good night. I loathe a liar."

With this he withdrew not only his head but also his four feet.

"Budge and be damned," came through the slit in his shell. "I'm going to sleep."

"You've never been awake," Mr. Lamb threw back, as he flipped himself to the surface of the tank.

"All goldfish are living lies," the turtle shouted after him, popping his head from his shell. "There's not a gram of gold in the whole silly mess of 'em. Just try to spend one, and see how much change you get back . . . not even a slim sardine."

Lamb dived swiftly back and made a vicious snap at the turtle's head, which was neatly withdrawn.

"I hope your stomach turns up before dawn," he bubbled through his shell.

"I'd like to meet you in a plate of soup," was the best Mr. Lamb could offer on the spur of the moment.

Still in an evil mood Mr. Lamb swaggered up to the goldfish

now huddled in a corner and, singling out one of them, addressed himself to it.

"What sort of fish are you?" he demanded truculently. "Male or female?"

"Female," snapped the goldfish, "for all the good it will do you."

"Hold on, baby," said Mr. Lamb. "I'm a fast and ruthless worker. No morals at all. I take my fun where I find it, and I find lots."

"Well, don't feel funny round here," the other retorted. "Go somewhere else and grab off your fun."

Mr. Lamb regarded her broodingly for a minute.

"The lot of you get out of this corner," he said at last. "I sleep here."

He chased the goldfish to the other end of the tank and swayed moodily off to sleep, thinking disagreeably about his wife. He strongly suspected that the good lady was planning something, that if she could only muster sufficient evidence to prove that he turned into things she would try to obtain a divorce. It would make a pretty case, one of the most unusual in the history of that splendid institution. Mr. Lamb did not object to being divorced. To him it was an end highly to be desired. But he did object to being divorced on the grounds of being a kangaroo or a horse or a seagull. That would be just a trifle too sensational for him.

His life as a goldfish was not a constant round of revelry, and he was forced to resort to various little devices to keep himself from being too oppressively bored.

His first effort in this direction was extremely elaborate and gave him no little satisfaction. He had discovered that by rubbing his nose against the side of the tank he was able to trace a clear impression which would, under favorable conditions, remain visible for a few minutes. This opened up rare possibilities. Mr. Lamb wondered why other goldfish had not hit upon the idea before. He began by tracing letters much in the manner of a sky-writer, and at last succeeded in mastering the art of writing backwards. After much practice he became

highly proficient, so much so, in fact that he felt himself qualified to give a public demonstration.

One evening when Leonard Gray was dining at the house for the further development of his art, Hebe called the attention of that gentleman and her mother to the strange behavior of the new goldfish, which Mrs. Lamb for purposes of her own, claimed to have purchased.

"Why, that new goldfish is actually tracing letters on the side of the tank," announced the acute Hebe. "Look, everybody! It seems to be trying to write something."

Everybody looked, including Thomas and one of the maids. All eyes grew wide with surprise, some even with consternation, when they spelled out the boldly written word:

ADULTERER

It is perhaps not edifying to record that the youngest person present was the one least shocked. With amused eyes Hebe looked from one blank face to another.

"Now I wonder," she said musingly, "just who that fish is panning. Are you by chance an adulterer, Thomas?"

Thomas looked really pleased.

"While my wife was alive, Miss Hebe," he explained, "she was a just but exacting woman. I had neither the time nor the energy, miss."

"I understand and sympathize, Thomas," the girl continued. "Well, how about you, Nora?"

"Why, Miss Hebe," Nora faltered, quite red but undismayed, "you know very well I'm not married."

"You win on a technicality," said Hebe. "Neither am I married, so a little possible adulteration lies for us in the future. Leonard, you don't need to be married, so that leaves only—"

"Hebe!" cried Mrs. Lamb, her voice well out of control. "Please bring this farce to an end. Immediately!"

Mr. Lamb, seeing that his efforts had not gone unrewarded, cut jubilant capers across the surface of the tank and before the dinner was over achieved the following cryptic warning:

KEEP OUT OF MY BED

Again Hebe made sure that this feat, though clearly unappreciated by her mother and Mr. Gray, did not pass unread by them.

From this point on, conversation became a matter of eloquent silence pierced by furtive glances. It is to be doubted if either Mrs. Lamb or her leading man was aware of what they were eating. Mechanically they masticated, sedulously averting their eyes from the tank containing the loquacious goldfish.

Later that night when Sandra Rush and Melville Long dropped in, Hebe introduced them to the remarkable goldfish, who with great speed and celerity traced on the side of the tank:

JAILBIRDS

He also attempted to flip some water in Sandra's face with his tail, but only succeeded in spotting her dress.

"It's the attenuated one all right," replied Sandra, "but very much compressed. I recognize his feeble sense of humor. Let's take him out and make him gasp a bit."

She made a snatch at the goldfish, but some clever fin work sent him to the floor of the tank where he remained craftily alert. Hebe stood considering the goldfish with an unusually serious expression. Long, taking note of this novel manifestation, asked the reason for it.

"Sapho says she bought him herself," replied Hebe. "Wonder why she claims that?"

Sandra looked at her quickly with large, comprehending eyes.

"Perhaps she intends to do in earnest what I suggested in fun," she said. "You'll have to stand guard over that goldfish, Hebe. Perhaps your little russet friend didn't foresee such a possibility as this. The attenuated one is quite defenseless now."

Sandra, too, was a little more serious than was her wont. For a long time she stood looking down at the goldfish lurking at the bottom of the tank.

"How long do you suppose this animal stuff is going to continue?" she asked of no one in particular. "It would be nice if he remained himself for a while, so that a person could get to know him."

The following evening Mr. Lamb arranged still another little diversion for the edification of his wife. When she put in an appearance for dinner she found him floating gruesomely with his belly prominently displayed for all the world to see. The other goldfish, huddled in a corner, seemed to be regarding the corpse with frightened eyes.

An expression of gratitude to God escaped the lips of the fish's wife. He had spared her the annoyance of being a murderess. The happy woman raised up her voice and called for aid.

"Hebe!" she cried. "Nora! My poor goldfish is dead."

When these witnesses had been summoned to her side Mrs. Lamb proceeded to do a thing that revolted her every instinct.

"See," she said in a voice of anguish as she dipped her hand in the water, "the beautiful thing must have died. What a pity, and what a darling he was!"

"You'll look swell in mourning," observed Hebe, closely scrutinizing the goldfish. "Are you going to give it a church funeral?"

"Don't be silly, Hebe," she replied casting her daughter an uneasy look. "This is no time for humor."

To hold a fish either dead or in the full flower of youth is not one of life's most reposeful moments—not for the vast majority of normally constituted persons. Mrs. Lamb, though not normally constituted, felt far from well when she fished the slithery body of her husband from the water.

"Nora!" she cried. "Get something to put him in . . . the garbage can."

"Him?" inquired Hebe mildly. "Do you know that fish's sex?"

It was at this moment that Mr. Lamb decided it was about time to stop playing dead. He had sacrificed for his art practically all the breath he could well afford to lose. If he ever got into the garbage can he felt sure he would sacrifice his

entire quota. Therefore, with an artful wriggle, he flipped himself from the delicate grasp of his wife and plopped gratefully back into the water.

When Nora returned with a coffee-strainer held diffidently in her hand she had the joy of seeing the goldfish sporting briskly about in his temporarily natural element.

Mrs. Lamb was not able to dine. She was revolted as well as disappointed. When she attempted to express her profound pleasure at the restoration of the goldfish to its former good health and spirits her voice choked with the insincerity of her emotion.

Naturally this altogether uncalled-for conduct on the part of a goldfish did not pass unnoticed by his colleagues in the tank. Their first attitude of fear passed to one of pity, for they felt that the poor fish was indeed a child of God, more than a little cracked about the gills. This attitude, however, soon gave place to one of admiration when they realized that there was a method behind the apparent madness of this resourceful companion of theirs. The lady goldfish, taking Mr. Lamb at his word, gave evidence of the sincerity of her admiration by suggesting the production of goldfish on a modest scale. Mr. Lamb toyed with the idea, but realizing he might be a bull or a zebra by the time his progeny were goldfish, the incongruity of the situation robbed it of its attractiveness.

He succeeded in teaching them to swim in formation like airplanes, putting them through loops, nose dives and tail spins. The servants could hardly be driven away from the tank so great was their interest in these aquatic displays. The climax was reached one morning when the four goldfish were discovered solemnly swimming backwards round their tank. There was no ostentation about this performance, no suggestion of a desire to please or to attract attention. It was as if overnight the fish had come to the decision that it was about time to reverse the order of things. They merely swam backwards with a naturalness that would have led one to believe that fish had always swum backwards from the infancy of Noah.

It was difficult to serve breakfast that morning through

Nora's inability to keep her attention fixed on her ordered duties. Even the impeccable Thomas seemed a trifle vague and preoccupied. Mrs. Lamb endeavored to ignore the goldfish, but Hebe's cheers of enthusiasm made it hard to pretend that all was not as usual.

The turtle was disgusted. When Mr. Lamb with pardonable pride asked him what he thought about it he replied that it was "Silly damn rot," and that no good came from going against the laws of nature.

With the turtle Mr. Lamb could find no point of agreement. They began to argue and bicker whenever they tried to converse. The turtle insisted on criticizing the furniture and appointments of the dining-room. He was particularly sarcastic about the design of the rug. Mr. Lamb naturally took this to heart, the dining-room being more or less his, and although he was not responsible for its arrangements he found himself defending them with the fervor of a zealot. To hear him argue with the turtle one would have thought that Mr. Lamb had personally selected each article of furniture in the room. Relations between the two were finally broken off when the turtle referred in the most disparaging language to a "long drink of water," who used to be seen hanging about the place and whose absence he noted with gratification. Mr. Lamb, fully appreciating the fact that he himself was the long drink of water in question, cursed the turtle roundly and was in turn as roundly cursed.

The fat was in the fire when Mr. Lamb wrote one evening for the benefit of his wife the following disquieting announcement:

TODAY A FISH: TOMORROW A SNAKE

Upon reading this warning Mrs. Lamb realized that it was high time to act. Her husband as a snake would be a far different matter from her husband as a goldfish. She nerved herself for action, endeavoring to absorb into her spirit the murky mood of Lady Macbeth on one of her bad days.

When the household was quiet that night she corded her dressing-gown round her waist and crept downstairs. For a

wonder Mr. Lamb was actually asleep and balanced on an even keel in his own private corner. This time Mrs. Lamb's hand was swift and sure. With a sharp intake of breath, she seized her unsuspecting husband and carried him to the kitchen. Here she looked desperately about for something in which to put him—not the garbage can, for his remains might be discovered there and the crime traced to her. Mrs. Lamb wanted a modest but secure sarcophagus for the body of her husband. An empty sardine tin would have done splendidly. A soda box would have been a great help at the moment. She was even considering the possibilities of squeezing him into a small bottle when Mr. Lamb made an energetic flip for liberty and life. The flip was only partially successful. It transferred him from Mrs. Lamb's hand to Mrs. Lamb's stomach where he continued his flipping, the cord round his wife's waist successfully preventing further descent.

Mrs. Lamb was no fit woman. She is not to be blamed. No woman is quite at her best with a wet and determined goldfish flipping clammily against her stomach. It is to be doubted if many men would have retained the stoicism and dignity of the more insensitive male under the same circumstances.

The picture Mrs. Lamb presented was that of an utterly abandoned muscle dancer, one thoroughly interested in her profession. It was an animated picture. Nor was it unaccompanied by sound. Little ecstatic cries, sharp exclamations, gasps of vital anguish fell from the convulsive lady's lips. They made the picture complete. At least so thought Hebe as she stood in the doorway and witnessed her mother's contortions.

Then before the girl's startled eyes an amazing thing took place. She saw Mrs. Lamb suddenly bulge to almost twice her size. She heard the rip of her nightdress, and before she had time to realize exactly what she was witnessing, she saw her mother flat on her back on the kitchen floor and her father, dripping wet, standing beside her. The little russet man had not deserted him. Mr. Lamb had been saved in very much less than the nick of time.

Mr. Lamb was breathing hard and apparently his wife was

not breathing at all. When she did breathe it was to give utterance to a wild cry.

"Murder!" she announced. "Murder! Your father's trying to strangle me."

"You damn near did strangle me," said Mr. Lamb.

He turned and grinned at his daughter.

"Hebe," he continued, "be a good girl and mix me a stiff drink. You may have one for yourself if you feel like it. These lightning changes are not so good for the nerves."

He extended a hand and helped his wife from the floor.

"Sorry, Sapho," he remarked apologetically, "but I could never fit in that bottle now."

Sapho was beyond speech.

Having failed lamentably to emulate the example of Lady Macbeth, the wife of the ex-fish felt that at least she could follow her advice. She stayed not on the order of her going, but went at once. Mr. Lamb picked up the bottle and considered it with a peculiar feeling.

"This," he said, extending the bottle to Hebe, "was intended to be your father's last resting place. I might have been a bottle baby, but be damned if I'll be a bottled corpse."

"Maybe the next time she'll have to use a cage," suggested Hebe.

"Perhaps," said her father dryly, "but you can use the bottle now."

Hebe did.

Chapter XV. Sandy Gets Her Man

MR. LAMB WAS NOT IN THE PINK. HE HAD RETURNED FROM his office far from well either mentally or physically. His life as a goldfish had not improved his health. He had absorbed too much stale water and overlooped a bit. Furthermore, the requirements of constantly readjusting himself were proving altogether too exacting.

Brother Douglas, fresh from a convention of the Directors of American Youth, handed him a letter. Without comment

he received it and began to read. Hebe watched her father. When he had finished the letter he swore more from amazement than anger.

"Listen to this," he said. "It's good."

Then he began to read:

"I can no longer live under the same roof with a murderer. Therefore I fly. I have stood every humiliation, every form of abuse, but I do not feel called upon to sacrifice my life for a man who turns into various things at a moment's notice. My life is in danger, therefore I fly. Do not attempt to find me. Do not attempt to follow. I fly. Pursuit is in vain. This is the end."

A dazzled silence followed the reading of this tragic epistle. It was broken by Mr. Lamb.

"Now, who in hell," he asked almost pleadingly, "does she expect to follow her?"

"I'm glad she remembered to send love and kisses to her unnatural daughter," said Hebe.

Douglas got up and began to whistle, "All Alone on the Telephone."

Mr. Lamb looked at him and grinned.

"Douglas," he asked, "how do you manage to be such a damn fool without ever an intermission?"

Brother Dug looked back at Mr. Lamb and also grinned.

"I was merely trying to keep you from breaking down," he replied. "When face to face with tragedy, sing, whistle or do both. Hebe, play something on the piano, and we'll all have a bit of a song."

Without a word Hebe went to the piano and struck a resounding chord. Had Mrs. Lamb not been so busy flying she would have had the pleasure of hearing floating through the windows of her abandoned home the words and music of the old familiar hymn, "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow." The voices of the three singers blended rather well, and the rendition of the hymn was marked by a certain sincerity of feeling not always to be found in church.

"Well, Douglas," asked Mr. Lamb, when the hymn had been brought to a crashing climax, "are you going to desert us now?"

"No," said Douglas, displaying an unexpected streak of embarrassment. "That is, not unless you want me. I'm a little too fat for flying, and I'm sure no one really wants to murder me, although once I was pretty nearly scared to death."

When he made this reply he carefully avoided looking at Mr. Lamb.

"Such loyalty, not to mention heroism, calls for one drink at the very least," said Hebe. "Perhaps more."

They had more.

When dinner was served Mr. Lamb looked beamingly upon Thomas.

"Thomas," he said, "Mrs. Lamb may not be with us for some time to come. Her presence is indefinitely postponed."

For once Thomas was taken off his guard. With eager hands he hastened to the table and started to remove the absent lady's plate as if to make sure of his master's statement. His face was alight with pleasure. Mr. Lamb's voice interrupted his activities.

"Not so ruthless, Thomas," he admonished. "You needn't do it now. Just remember it in the future. And Thomas," he added, "is there any of the old stock left, the wine you drank in the days of my youth?"

"I didn't think you remembered, sir," replied the old man.

"Unfortunately for you I did," said Mr. Lamb.

"There are some bottles," said Thomas. "A few, sir."

"One," his master ordered.

Thomas departed under full sail. As Nora hurried past him in the pantry she felt herself unexpectedly pinched and heard him humming a song he had unearthed from some dim recess of his memory.

"I'll get the evening out for that," this highly competent maid confidently promised herself.

As Mr. Lamb sat at dinner his eyes kept constantly straying to the aquarium where the three goldfish he had come to know so well were drifting drowsily about as if in languid expectation of a lost leader. It gave him a feeling of satisfaction to know that his old enemy, the turtle, was once again forced to peer out at the "long drink of water" he had spoken of so

disparagingly. Impulsively Lamb rose from the table and with his knife budged the old fellow across the bottom of the tank.

"How indignant he must be," thought Mr. Lamb. "I only wish he could appreciate the full flavor of the situation."

Then he singled out the lady goldfish and considered her for a moment.

"I might have been the father of her children," he mused as he returned to the table. "That would have been a pretty state of affairs."

Throughout the remainder of the dinner he could not shake off the weird knowledge that only a short time ago he had been swimming about in that tank and looking out at his wife and daughter and the ubiquitous Mr. Gray. It would be difficult, he decided, for the little russet man to provide for him a more novel experience. Lamb heartily hoped it would be the last. He was more than willing now to remain a normal human being for the rest of his life. His desire to remain himself was greatly intensified now that his wife was absent, permanently absent, he hoped. This line of thought automatically brought him round to Sandra Rush, and a dark, brooding look came into his eyes. He recalled her faraway expression when she had watched the scenery that morning on the train, and the story she had told him about the two little ponds. She was not always depraved. Sometimes she could be quite decent. Very seldom though. Mostly mad and wild and reckless.

"Too old," he said, unconsciously speaking aloud, "Too damn old."

"Beg your pardon, sir," said Thomas. "Is the chicken too tough for you?"

"Chicken's fine," replied Mr. Lamb. "Why?"

"I thought I heard you say it was too old, sir," said Thomas. "I felt sure it was about the suitable age, sir."

"But I'm not, Thomas," Mr. Lamb replied. "I'm too damn old. Don't you think so?"

"That depends," answered Thomas consideringly. "Too old for what, if I may ask, sir?"

"Oh, go to the devil, you fossilized lump of sin," said Mr. Lamb. "I didn't mean six-day bicycle racing."

"Well you might be a few years over for that," was the imperturbable decision of Thomas, "but you're still good for your share of—er—sport, if I make myself clear, sir."

"Most delicately so, Thomas," put in Hebe. "I quite agree with you. It pleases our major to believe that he is of ancient vintage. By cultivating that frame of mind he hopes to escape adventure."

"I've had adventures enough, God knows," said Mr. Lamb.

"But not of the nature I mean," responded his daughter. "Those still lie ahead."

"There's not much good in either of you," declared Mr. Lamb, putting down his coffee cup. "You'll excuse me now if I retire to my study. Douglas, I hope you will remain uncorrupted now that your sister is no longer here to protect you."

"I have nothing to fear in that line," observed Douglas. "My adventures lie neither behind me nor before. That's one of the tragedies of a fat man."

"He throbs out his sex in song," said Hebe, as Mr. Lamb left the room.

Retrieving the much interrupted Kai Lung, Mr. Lamb elaborately arranged himself in his chair and prayed to God that he should be allowed to proceed at least a few pages in the book before he was transformed into another animal, bird, reptile, or fish. He had read exactly two paragraphs when the door flew open and Sandra burst into the room.

"I thought you'd be glad to see me," she cried, standing radiantly before him.

"What led you to form that totally erroneous impression?" asked Mr. Lamb, looking at the girl over the top of his book.

"Why, Sapho's decamped," she went on happily. "And now everything's going to be all right."

"All right for what?" Mr. Lamb demanded unbendingly.

"For us," said Sandy breathlessly. "The coast is clear."

"It isn't at all clear to me," Mr. Lamb replied. "What form of depravity are you now suggesting?"

"Any and all," said Sandra. "You're my man now."

In spite of himself Mr. Lamb could not repress a grin.

"Get the hell out of here," was all he said.

"Put me out," she challenged.

"Go on," warned Mr. Lamb. "Get the hell out."

"Get the hell me out if you can," she answered.

Mr. Lamb rose slowly and stood over the girl. Quite deliberately, quite effortlessly, he picked her up in his arms and held her suspended.

"I don't know whether to spank or to kiss you," he remarked, looking unsmilingly down into her deep and disturbingly provocative eyes.

"I'm all set for a little of both," said Sandy.

Lamb did the latter. He did it extremely well, so well, in fact, that Thomas, entering with a decanter of whisky, remained unnoticed in the doorway. Quietly the old fellow closed the door and seated himself on one of the dining-room chairs, a liberty he had never taken. Then he raised the decanter to his lips and drank a silent toast. Things were indeed looking up in the house of Lamb.

Somewhat subdued, Sandra and Mr. Lamb were sitting a little later on the private veranda adjoining his study.

"I hope you don't turn into a bear," said Sandra.

"I hope I've done my last turn," said Mr. Lamb.

"So do I," she answered. "I'd hate to lose you now."

Mr. Lamb turned in his chair and found her eyes in the darkness.

"You're sure you're not kidding me?" he asked. "You know you're such an exaggerated person. I'm never sure whether you're making fun of me or not. You see, I'm not used to young girls. I've always been sort of out of it and faithful—not to her so much as to myself. This thing sort of puzzles me. I don't see where I get off with a fine-looking girl like you. Old enough to be your father."

There was something so utterly helpless and fumbling in this speech of Mr. Lamb's, something so amazingly innocent and sincere that Sandra for no reason that she could fathom felt very much like crying. Dimly she sensed the repressed youth and longing behind the unappetizing years through which this long, sardonic, quietly observant man by her side had lived. While his wife had been mouthing about beauty and living

quite an unbeautiful life, he had just grinned his slow, irritating grin and silently kept on wanting. And being decent and rather commonplace. Yes, Sandra was more than sure that she was not kidding. But she did not reply to his question. She did not want to hear her own voice. She merely reached out and taking his long, lean hand, held it against her breast.

Way down below them in the darkness the lights of the town lay against the other side of the valley. Even the blot contributed its share to the general illumination.

Mr. Lamb was not unhappy. Neither was the girl. Both were silent. It seemed better so.

Some hours later when Thomas was pouring Mr. Lamb his invariable nightcap, the old servant paused with the decanter half raised and regarded this man whose toys he had once mended.

"You're fit as a fiddle, Mr. Lawrence," he offered. "Even for bicycle racing, or I am very much mistaken, sir."

"What leads you to believe that, Thomas?" Mr. Lamb asked suspiciously.

"General observations, sir," said Thomas. "General observation. Nothing more, sir. Good night."

Leaving Mr. Lamb slightly puzzled, Thomas with an annoyingly self-satisfied expression, quietly withdrew.

"Now, I'm in a devil of a mess," thought Mr. Lamb, as he pondered cheerfully over his glass.

Even Kai Lung lay forgotten upon his knee.

Chapter XVI. Less Than the Dust

WHEN MR. LAMB WOKE UP NEXT MORNING HE WAS AS SICK AS a dog. And he was a dog. Weakly he flopped himself out of bed and crawled across the room to his mirror. He had not the vaguest idea of what he was. He knew he was something. He knew he was not himself. He was some sort of four-footed animal with fur, and from the looks of his feet Mr. Lamb felt convinced that he could not be much of an animal.

"That looking-glass," he thought to himself, "has reflected many weird and startling images, but this time I think it's going to get the shock of its life. So, perhaps, am I."

Lamb was right. The most woebegone, flop-eared, putty-footed, miscellaneous assortment of canine maladjustments leered out at him from the mirror.

On previous occasions the little russet man had always done well by Mr. Lamb. He had been the best of everything, no matter what it was. He had been an imposing stallion, a bang-up seagull, a two-fisted kangaroo, and a goldfish of note. Now, however, he was the worst dog he had ever seen, obviously the son of a mother who had possessed an unlimited capacity for experimentation, relieved by a certain jocular capriciousness.

Of this dog confronting him, Lamb recognized little of himself save perhaps a broodingly speculative cast of the eye. His ears were long, spiritless, and yellow, seemingly sewed onto his head as an afterthought. His hair grew over his black and tan body in unbecoming fits and starts, first here and then there. He was a tufted dog. His feet were large and woolly. They splayed out in front, giving him the appearance of wearing old turned-up carpet-slippers. He was a long, low, ribby dog. One side of his face was black, the other side yellow. Along his body this color scheme had been reversed. He would have made a striking model for a woman's bathing costume, his haunches being black and yellow and his chest yellow and black. Taking him all in all he was a dog to give one pause, a dog to walk around and speculate upon, one to examine in detail at close range and then to view from afar for a full effect.

Mr. Lamb did not regard himself in this light. Sick as he felt, his heart was filled with shame. He had a desire to crawl away to some quiet place and there to make an end of it all. Life which last night had tasted so sweet now lay sour in his mouth. His long, thin, spineless tail drooped despondently on the floor.

"I can't possibly let myself be seen in this appalling condition," he decided, as he placed a mop of a paw against his swimming head.

When he had retired the previous evening he had known he

was going to be ill, but he had not taken into consideration the fact that he was also going to be a dog—and such a dog as he had turned out to be.

Because of the absence of his wife he had allowed the door between the two rooms to remain open. With a loose, uncoördinated motion he shuffled through and by a little clever, but exhausting manipulation got himself out into the hall. Downstairs he found an open window through which he made a furtive and inglorious exit, landing with a thud on the grass. For a moment he lay there painfully recovering his breath and strength, then he shambled weakly off across the lawn, his body aching and tongue lolling out.

Hebe from her window witnessed the departure of this unfortunate-looking animal, little realizing that it was her father she saw, fleeing to escape the eyes of those who knew him.

Mr. Lamb has only the haziest memory of what occurred to him after leaving his home. Certain episodes stand out in his mind like flashes caught from a fast-fading dream.

He recalled, for instance, slinking along the shadowy side of the road until he came to a rustic bridge where two men were holding a heated debate upon religion, the day being Sunday and their flasks potent with applejack. Here in an unneeded little patch of sunlight Mr. Lamb lay down to rest and to warm himself a bit.

"Believe in your miracles if you will," one of the religious fanatics was saying, "but as for me I think they're a lot of apple-sauce invented by a gang of grafting old prophets who couldn't even predict the next day's weather."

"Sure they could," said the other. "Didn't they call the turn on many a blight and famine? You should read about all the things they figgered out—floods, pestilence, the destruction of towns, battles and alarms and—and—all sorts of calamities."

"They must have been a cheerful little bunch of predicters," observed the unbeliever ironically. "Didn't they ever say something pleasant?"

The other paused to consider this difficult question. It was a bit of a poser for him, yet he felt duty-bound to stand up for

the prophets. Suddenly his face cleared. Light had been given him.

"Sure they did," he answered. "Judgment Day."

"A very pleasant day that'll be," said the other. "Especially for you. And if they did, it was guesswork, pure guesswork."

He took a swig at his flask and looked triumphantly at his friend, then let his gaze drift to the dog lying huddled up in the grass and leaves.

"Well, if all them things weren't miracles," the defender of the faith demanded, "just what would you call a miracle?"

"This is what I'd call a miracle," was the other man's ready reply. "If that there mut should get up right now and, putting his nose in the center of this bridge, make a complete circle with his awful-looking body that would be some miracle."

Sick as he was, Mr. Lamb could not resist the temptation. He got up and walked to the center of the bridge. Then placing his nose down in the dust he held it firmly in position and described a completed circle with his body. With his nose still in place he rolled up his eyes to see if he had produced the desired effect or if he should continue on. The men were stunned. They returned the dog's inquiring gaze with eyes full of applejack, wonder, and trepidation. The unbeliever was actually frightened. He took another pull at his flask and timidly fixed his eyes on the dog. Mr. Lamb once more deliberately described a circle and sat down in the middle of it, holding up one paw as if in benediction.

"God Almighty, it's a miracle," breathed the unbeliever. "Do you think we should kneel down and pray?"

"Let's get rid of these flasks," suggested his friend. "It doesn't look quite right."

The two men tossed their flasks in the bushes, then looked at Mr. Lamb for some sign of approval. Mr. Lamb nodded his head three times, rose and shambled weakly down the road. The men gazed after the retreating dog until a turn in the road hid him from view. For a moment they looked silently at each other, then like the vast majority of converts, they backslid completely and, diving into the bushes, returned with their flasks, which they drained with great speed and dexterity. By

nightfall they were telling their friends about a dog that sang hymns and preached sermons.

Mr. Lamb's next memory is not so pleasant. It was night and he was standing on the lawn of a low, rambling, brightly lighted house. Shouts and laughter came through the windows. Someone was singing, or trying to sing, "Frankie and Johnny." Behind the house was a background of high black trees. They were silent as if listening.

Lamb dragged himself to the porch and peered through the open door. He saw three women and four men sprawled about the place in attitudes of drunken abandon. One of the men was propped up in a narrow, lounge bed. Although the night was warm, a bathrobe was thrown round his shoulders. He was coughing and smoking and drinking. From time to time he would call to one of the women, apparently his wife, and ask her to replenish his glass. Apart from this tender attention the woman gave scant care to the sick man. She was completely wrapped up in a tall, languid-looking person, and she was drunk enough to show it. Her form of love-making consisted in displaying her legs and contradicting everything said by the object of her affection. Gin and whisky bottles and overturned glasses were everywhere in evidence. From time to time violent quarrels would break out between one of the couples, and then the air was filled with abuse and recrimination.

"Lower away," called the sick man at last to his wife, pointing to her bare thighs.

"Aw, don't be an old woman," she answered across the room, as she lolled back on a couch with her evening's selection. "Everybody knows I got legs. What's wrong in taking things easy?"

Then she proceeded to tell the entire room just how jealous her husband was, and quoted some remarks he had made about one of the men present.

Mr. Lamb crept across the floor and seated himself by the sick man's couch. The sick man reached down and fondled one of the dog's long, aimless ears. No one else seemed to pay any attention to Mr. Lamb. They were all too busy with their own

affairs. When the sick man's eyes looked down into his, Mr. Lamb read nothing in them but drunken despair.

"This is not going to be so good," said Mr. Lamb to himself. "This man is not only sick and drunk but also nearly out of his mind with jealousy. Can't say that I blame him. Something is going to happen."

For a moment he saw the dark, brooding trees waiting and listening behind the house.

Presently the sick man called to another girl. He whispered something in her ear, and she brought him a bottle of gin which he kept by his side, drinking the stuff raw from time to time. He was very drunk now, hardly able to see. Opposite him on another couch his wife was openly kissing her companion. The room had grown quiet. Some of the lights had been turned out.

In the stillness could be heard the broken voice of the sick man trying to sing a nursery song:

" 'To bed. To bed,' said Sleepy Head
'Let's tarry a while,' said Slow."

The song seemed plaintively incongruous in that unhealthy setting. The girl who had brought him the bottle of gin was kissing her partner and crying at the same time.

Mr. Lamb was beginning to feel decidedly uncomfortable, but some instinct kept him by the side of his companion. Coughing violently, the man reached down for the bottle, groped about until he had found it, then raised it to his lips. When he took it away the bottle was empty and the man's face was bathed in sweat. A broken sound came from his chest.

" 'To bed. To bed,' said Sleepy Head." The voice stopped and the man slumped forward. He stopped coughing.

His wife looked at him for some minutes, then turned to her friend and nodded. They rose and quickly passed through a door leading to a dark room. Half an hour passed, and still the drunken man did not stir. One hand hung limply over the side of his couch. Mr. Lamb sniffed it and suddenly crouched back. He knew that the man was dead.

When the wife returned with her partner, her eyes dark,

heavy, and drunken, his sleepily triumphant, she went over and shook her husband by the shoulders.

"Wake up, old woman!" she cried. "You're missing all the fun."

Mr. Lamb crouched cold with the horror of the situation.

"Why, the old woman's dead-drunk," his wife announced, as the dead man slid over on the couch. "Come on everybody, let's have some fun. The killjoy's through for the night."

With this she took a drink of gin, and pulling up her already short skirts, threw her arms round her lover's neck and danced madly about the room. The others followed her example.

More drinks and more dancing. A girl went over to the still figure on the couch and took its hand. She gave a start, and bent over to examine its face, feeling the cold skin with trembling fingers. Then she hurriedly called one of the men to her and together they examined the crumpled form. The man placed a hand over the stopped heart. When he rose his face was white.

"You tell her," was all he said.

"Come here," called the girl to the wife.

"Like hell," she replied. "I'm comfortable here on the couch. He'll sleep all night. Let him alone."

She took a drink from a bottle and swayed back on the couch. She was head down in gin. The other girl approached and stood looking down at the two locked figures.

"Your husband is quite dead," she said quietly.

"Come again," replied the other, sitting up and holding her head in her hands. "Dead, you say?"

Then she began to laugh.

"Dead, you say? God, that's funny! He would do a thing like that. Always spoiling a party."

Day was breaking, and as Mr. Lamb slipped through it he kept hearing the dead man singing, " 'To bed. To bed,' said Sleepy Head."

Mr. Lamb next remembers himself lying weak from exhaustion and nausea in the sunlight before a small cottage. Through the door he could see a man and his wife facing each other across the breakfast table. A good-looking couple, but hostile. Their eyes met with studied indifference. No words were

exchanged between them. When the man rose to get his hat a new expression came into the woman's eyes as she furtively followed his movements. There was in them something soft, a sort of silent cry. Without uttering a word of farewell, the man went to the door of the cottage, then stopped when he saw the sick dog. With a low murmur of friendship he bent over Mr. Lamb and lifted the weary head. Then the man brought the dog into the cottage.

With a bitter expression about her lips, the woman stood by the stove and watched her husband patting and fondling the dog. In one hand she held a pan of hot water. When the man asked her for some hot milk she shrugged her shoulders and turned away.

"Damn you," said the man in a low voice. "Get me some hot milk for the poor, sick creature."

Lamb hated hot milk, but appreciated the man's good intentions.

"Will you get that milk?" the man demanded, his voice still low and impersonal.

Suddenly the woman flared up and turned on her husband. Her face was white with something deeper than anger.

"No!" she cried, dashing the hot water over Mr. Lamb. "No! No! No!"

Mr. Lamb gave a low moan of pain, but made no move. His eyes were on the woman. She was trembling with little shudders of revulsion. He saw the man spring forward and slap the woman sharply across the face. The woman swayed slightly, then stood quite still looking straight ahead of her, the same bitter smile fixed on her lips.

Then Mr. Lamb saw the man slowly turn his back upon the woman. His head dropped, and two tears trickled down his cheeks. His hands were clenched by his sides. Gradually the bitter smile melted from the woman's lips and in its place came a certain tenderness.

"Come here," she said at last, holding out her arms to the man. "Come here, come here to me."

And the man went to his wife's arms. She held him fiercely,

and Lamb beheld her face with pleasure. A pretty woman she was, he thought, and well set up. Just a trifle too impulsive.

He stayed only long enough to show that there was no hard feeling, then quietly slipped away, leaving the man and his wife with their tongues at last unloosed. Once more he took to the road, feeling somewhat Boy Scoutish, having just performed his daily good deed.

Exactly when it was Lamb never rightly remembered. All he can recall is seeing a large, handsome hall with the open doors of a library at one end. He also recalls a wide stairway mounting up majestically to a balcony. A fine, lean, white-haired old gentleman was having a row with an equally fine and lean-looking son. Both were saying things they would regret the moment they were uttered.

"Your political ideas, like all your ideas, are fallacious right through," the old man said. "Those radical friends you are now cultivating should be taken out and shot. Yes, sir! Shoot 'em down. They're Reds . . . the scum. And furthermore they are not welcome here. I forbid them the house."

"So I can't bring my friends into my own home," replied the young man, rising excitedly and facing his father. "Then it isn't a home of mine. I forbid myself the house where my friends are not welcome."

The old gentleman stiffened. There was a cold smile on his lips.

"Forbid and be damned," he said distinctly. "Go live with the friends of your choice."

Without another word the young man raced up the stairs. Mr. Lamb remembers watching from his place of concealment the old gentleman's eyes as his son rushed away. They were filled with anxiety and loneliness now that the mask of pride had been momentarily dropped. He paced up and down the heavy carpet, opening and closing his hands helplessly. Now he looked old indeed to Mr. Lamb—old and somewhat smaller.

In a short time the boy returned with two suitcases, and once more the old gentleman stiffened, forcing the years and the loneliness back by an effort of his stubborn old will, his pride of race and breeding, his belief in lost traditions.

"You will not be inconvenienced any more," said the young man. "Good-by, sir."

"Your consideration is appreciated," replied his father. Good-by."

The young man looked back once, hesitated, but seeing his father standing with his back to him, he turned away and disappeared through a door in the hall. The moment the door closed the old gentleman altered his rodlike attitude and stood as if listening. Presently he heard the hum of a motor, and something like a sigh escaped his lips. He fumbled in a cigar box and automatically selected a breva, then he sank to a chair and looked dully at the unlighted cigar.

It was at this point that Mr. Lamb slipped out of his corner and lurched to the gravel driveway. He did not know what he was going to do, but he fully intended to do something. This silly impasse between the old fool and the young fool must be broken. He saw the glare of the headlights sweeping round the curve from behind the house, and he began to bark and howl the best he knew how. Dragging himself to the middle of the driveway, he pranced on his hind legs and waved his foolish-looking paws commandingly.

Too late. The lights swerved sharply. Mr. Lamb felt himself smashed and hurtled through the night. Then he heard the crash of the automobile as it collided with one of the trees on the lawn. Still Mr. Lamb retained consciousness.

He saw the old gentleman, followed by several servants, hurrying down the driveway.

"My boy," the old gentleman called through the darkness. "Are you hurt?"

"It's all right, dad," came the relieving response. "I'm looking for a poor mut I hit. Bear a hand and help me find him."

"It's a wonder your damn fool neck isn't broken," said the old gentleman, coming to the flood of the lights.

He put his arm round his son's shoulder.

"Sure?" he asked.

"Sure, sir," said his son. "But the mut is, I'm afraid. Odd acting dog. He seemed to be deliberately trying to stop the car."

"A good sort," said the old gentleman. "Hope we can patch him up."

With the aid of a flashlight, Mr. Lamb was eventually plucked from a bush. The old gentleman himself carried him into the house. A man was dispatched in another car for a doctor. Just before Mr. Lamb lost control of the situation, he had the pleasure of seeing two suitcases being carried up the broad stairs. Then Lamb for the nonce let the world go hang. It was too full of trouble for him. He could not be expected to arrange and settle everything.

When he once more favored the world with his presence, Mr. Lamb found himself on the clean, warm earth. He was in a sort of wired runway at the end of which was something that appeared to be a dog-house de luxe. A soft pillow was beneath his head, and a broken bandage trailed from his left foot. But what was more disconcerting still was the large, red face of a man in proximity to his.

"What did you want to get in here for?" the face inquired reproachfully.

Mr. Lamb looked down at himself and realized with a start that he was no longer a dog. Once more he was Mr. T. Lawrence Lamb, a conservative investment banker in an extremely embarrassing position.

"I didn't want to get in here," was all he could think of replying. "Where in the deuce am I?"

"You're in one of the finest dog hospitals in the country," replied the face with pardonable pride. "One of the smartest and the swellest."

"That," said Mr. Lamb, "might make a profound impression on a dog, but it leaves me quite unelated. I don't want to be in a dog hospital no matter how swagger it may be."

"Then why did you get up out of bed and deliberately sneak over the wire in your pajamas?" asked the face.

It was true. Mr. Lamb was clad only in his sleeping togs. He had to admit that undeniable fact. But he very much disliked to be lying down on the flat of his back and talking up to that red face suspended above him like the sun.

"Listen," said Mr. Lamb, after a moment of swift consider-

ing. "If you'll only remove that face of yours I'll try to get up and talk to you on my feet."

The face was slowly and reluctantly withdrawn, and Mr. Lamb felt less like a bug under microscopic examination.

"Well?" said the wearer of the face, when Mr. Lamb stood confronting him.

"Ah yes," replied Mr. Lamb easily. "I was thrown in here."

The man looked more hurt than surprised.

"Come again," he remarked brutally.

"Very well," said Mr. Lamb. "I'm a somnambulist."

"That kind of talk ain't going to get you anywhere," replied the man.

"I'm a sleep-walker," explained Mr. Lamb.

"You're a damn poor liar," said the man.

"I'm doing the best I can," said Mr. Lamb. "Help me out, won't you?"

"What did you do with the dog?" the man demanded inflexibly.

"The dog must have gone out as I came in," said Mr. Lamb. "I never saw a dog. I was sound asleep."

"And snoring," supplied the man with heavy sarcasm.

"Now you're kidding me," said Mr. Lamb. "I'm serious."

"I know," replied the man. "That's what makes it so funny."

He looked up and down the runway.

"Well, the mut's gone," he remarked, "and it's good riddance of bad rubbish. Never had such a clown in our kennels before. It mortified me to have to look after him, he was that low-blooded. Some rich gentleman sent him to us."

Mr. Lamb had heard quite enough about the dog. He looked at himself in perplexity, then turned once more to the man.

"Listen here," he said, "we're getting nowhere this way. Lend me an overcoat and get me a taxi, and I'll write you a letter all about it . . . and the letter will have something in it much more interesting than news. Get me?"

The man got him. Also he got him an overcoat, something in the line of slippers, and a taxicab.

And, with the help of these, Mr. Lamb got home . . . gratefully, wearily and with the utmost discretion.

Chapter XVII. In Sandra's Bed

"BEEN OUT FOR A BIT OF A WALK," MR. LAMB WHISPERED, SUDdenly meeting Thomas face to face as he, Lamb, was tiptoeing through the hall. "A bright, fresh morning."

"It is, sir," replied Thomas blandly. "Just come back from a nice, long swim myself."

Mr. Lamb appeared not to have caught this surprising announcement of the old servant. He was about to hurry to his room when he suddenly remembered something.

"By the way," he called back. "There's a taxi man outside. Slip him a good tip. I got tired, and he brought me home."

Thomas, making some innocent observation about the convenience of finding taxicabs in the early morning on deserted country roads, departed on his mission, and Mr. Lamb sought the seclusion of his room. Here he bathed, shaved, and dressed, and once more faced the world as a respectable member of society. Then he sat down and thought.

His experiences as a dog had given him enough to think about. He had never realized before that so many melodramas were taking place about him—so many tragic, stupid, and sordid ones, so many touchingly human. During the time that had elapsed since he had been a terribly sick dog Lamb had unconsciously grown. Always tolerant, his tolerance now was vouchsafed a deeper understanding. He could not keep himself from wondering how that drunken girl had felt when she finally came to her senses and fully appreciated all that had happened. Would her open betrayal and the death of her husband trouble her mind greatly? Mr. Lamb doubted it. She would probably get drunk again and continue on with her furtively vicious life. He wondered, too, how such women acted when they grew old, what memories they dodged, what thoughts haunted the shallow reaches of their brains. Her husband could hardly have been an admirable person, yet for

some reason Lamb had taken rather a fancy to the chap, drunk as he had been. Boredom and bad gin were responsible for so much.

Mr. Lamb looked at his calendar and found that he had been a dog for little more than a week. Where he had lain and strayed during that time, how long he had remained at the kennels under the care of the moon-faced man, he had not the remotest idea. He went to his desk and wrote a letter to this individual. This letter bore no signature, but contained a ten-dollar bill. When Thomas entered with a pot of coffee and some eggs and toast, Mr. Lamb gave him the letter and, indicating the overcoat and slippers, told him what to do with them. Thomas needed no instructions having had a brief but illuminating conversation with the taxi-driver.

Although the thought of the office was distasteful to him, Lamb went in by a late train. He would have liked to have seen his daughter, but learned that she had spent the night with Miss Rush, the house being rather lonesome on account of the absence of her father.

He found that his office was still doing business, although much remained to be done. This he proceeded to do as well as he could during the hours at his disposal, then, after reassuring Billings as to the state of his health and mind, Mr. Lamb hurried home. The sanity of the office had helped somewhat to restore his mental balance and to dispel the morbid speculations that were disturbing him. The nursery song of the dying man kept floating across his thoughts. Lamb could not fight down the growing impression that he was a man apart, that somehow the lines of communication between himself and the rest of the world had been severed, perhaps for all time. He was seriously worried now by the situation in which he found himself. If the little russet man set his mind on it, he could take him clean through the animal kingdom, not to mention birds, fish, and reptiles—insects even. Mr. Lamb was appalled by the thought. Any sort of arrangement with Sandra was entirely out of the question so long as he kept on changing. Even Hebe would eventually grow tired of a father who possessed within him the makings of a complete jungle.

It was in no cheerful frame of mind that Mr. Lamb sat down to dinner that night. Nor was his hilarity heightened by what Hebe had to report.

It seemed that during his absence Mrs. Lamb had returned to the house, packed most of her possessions and, with the aid of two taxicabs, departed mysteriously to parts unknown. She had been accompanied by her maid. This news was not in itself disagreeable to Mr. Lamb, but what went with it was not so reassuring. Hebe gave her father to understand that in the course of a little chat with her mother the good lady had shown she possessed some very accurate knowledge of the recent activities of her husband. It appeared that she was quietly collecting stray but alarming scraps of evidence as well as interviewing certain parties. Just how she intended to use this evidence and what her ultimate intentions were Hebe was unable to say. However, it was agreed between father and daughter that Sapho's intentions so far as they were concerned could hardly be of a rosy hue.

"Would you object very much to being divorced?" asked Hebe.

"No," answered Mr. Lamb readily enough, "but I would object very much to being displayed. I have no desire to furnish material for the Sunday supplements and medical journals. Nor do I want to be interviewed by reporters on how it feels to be a goldfish or a kangaroo's opinion of New York's night clubs. Your mother, my child, is not only after her freedom, but also her revenge. You see, Hebe, we've really kidded her unmercifully even though she did try to cram me into a bottle. Have you no sympathy at all for her? My indifference is of course natural, but you're a sort of blood relation. I don't quite understand—"

"Mother never had much time for me," Hebe broke in upon her father. "That's one of the reasons I'm such a hard-boiled egg. When I was a kid I thought I was fond of her, tried to make myself believe I had a regular mother, but that hopeful phase didn't last long. Sapho didn't really ever care except in front of company. Then another thing, major: I'm in the way of being a woman creature and I get some purely feminine

slants on the workings of her mind. She's her own woman, major, first, last and all time. If she can't be the bell cow she's not going to trail along. That's all there is to it. When I think of that worm Leonard Gray, I can find no sympathy in my system for Sapho. She isn't breaking her heart about us and hasn't been for years. The thing that surprises me is that she ever let me be born. I know for a fact that since I've been a so-called young lady, she's resented my existence. Sapho brooks no competition. She wants no reminder of the advancing years. Hope you don't mind me speaking like this of my own mother, but I've known for some time past I should give tongue. One can't be loyal to two warring factions without getting shot full of emotional holes. When you happen to be with us I prefer to be loyal to you."

It was a tremendous speech for Hebe. Her father gazed at the girl in surprise. He had never before heard her speak so earnestly or at such length. She was indeed a young lady with a head as level as her tongue was light.

"Well," he said, rising from the table and stretching his long arms, "I do wish things would settle down a bit—myself especially. Ever since we gave that little old chap a lift my life has been just one long atavistic orgy."

That evening he was given ample opportunity to peruse his book without interruption. As a matter of fact he had a little more privacy than he needed. For an hour or so he waited impatiently in his study for Sandra to put in an appearance, then abandoning hope he turned to his book and soon became absorbed. About midnight Thomas came in to arrange a drink for his master and to see if he wanted anything. It was a ceremony with Thomas, one he loved to perform, and Mr. Lamb, realizing this, permitted his old friend to go through with it.

"You're feeling quite yourself, sir?" inquired Thomas as he was about to withdraw.

"Yes," answered Mr. Lamb dryly. "For a change."

"Glad to hear it, sir," said Thomas. "Good night."

"Good night," replied Mr. Lamb. "And, Thomas, don't forget to leave a window open in the library. This house needs a little downstairs ventilation."

Thomas understood. Ever since these strange disappearances of Mr. Lamb the old man had been taking this precaution. It had been Hebe who had first suggested the idea to him.

After Thomas had quietly closed the door Mr. Lamb returned to his book and his drink. Presently his head began to grow heavy, and at last he fell asleep.

Some hours later he awoke with the impression that all was not as it should be. His drowsy eyes focused themselves on a long tail conscientiously striped with gray and black bands.

"Either that tail belongs to me," he thought dreamily, "or else a cat is sitting on my lap."

After some minutes of gloomy speculation he worked up enough enterprise to settle the question. If the tail moved when he bade it move then the tail belonged to him, or rather he belonged to the tail; and if he belonged to the tail, then it followed that he was a cat. He thought the tail into action, and it moved with graceful majesty. "It's mine," he said to himself regretfully. "I'm it again."

He remained as he was in the chair, all curled up and considering. If he were half as fearful a cat as he had been a dog, he decided he would remain in that chair without budging until the little russet man, in the fulness of time, saw fit to turn him into something else. He held out one paw and studied it critically. It was a sizable, efficient-looking paw and appeared to be well equipped with claws especially designed for back-yard combats. So far so good, he decided. Then he turned his attention to his tail. The tail, too, was not to be despised. It was a long, lashable tail, sleek and artistically groomed. Mr. Lamb took heart. Nevertheless he was loath to take a full view of himself in the mirror. The last shock had been too great. He dared not run the risk of another. Then his eyes fell on the decanter.

Now, it is a strange example of perverseness that, as a man, Mr. Lamb drank consistently but, except on rare occasions, always with moderation, whereas, whenever he became an animal, his first desire was to get himself well-potted and to go about in search of trouble. Only extreme nausea had prevented him from being a drunken, roistering dog, ill-favored by

nature and disorderly through inclination. He now began to scheme and plan how he could best extract a drink from the decanter. It would require no little doing—that he fully realized—but the difficulty of the undertaking made him concentrate upon its accomplishment the more earnestly.

Finally he rose and, taking his empty glass from the table with his two paws, he managed to place it on the arm of his chair which was next to the table and a little below its level. Then he inserted a paw into the mouth of the decanter and dragged it to the desired position. Judging the distance to a nicety, Lamb slowly tilted the decanter until a satisfactory stream curved out and fell into the glass. It was a neat, clean-cut achievement, and Mr. Lamb could not refrain from admiring his own dexterity.

"Gad!" he exclaimed to himself. "Didn't even spill a drop. Not one. I really deserve this drink."

Whether he deserved the drink or not he proceeded to take it with avidity, lapping up the fiery liquor with a long, red, ladle-shaped tongue.

"I would have saved you the trouble, major," came a level voice from the doorway.

Mr. Lamb interrupted his lapping just long enough to nod busily at his daughter, then continued to polish off his drink to the limit of his tongue's effectiveness, after which he sat down in his chair and turned two glittering eyes on Hebe. The girl came into the room and closed the door.

"I discovered you weren't in your bed," she remarked, "so I naturally suspected the worst. Well, you're not a bad-looking cat," she went on. "As a matter of fact you're about the swellest thing in the line of a cat I've ever seen—and one of the largest."

This gave Mr. Lamb an idea. He had long entertained a grudge against the unmannerly back-yard despot that had attempted to make the bowl of puffed rice his own, when Lamb had been a seagull. He would settle this grudge without further procrastination. It should be done.

Leaping from his chair he raced to the open window in the library and literally hurled himself into the darkness. The huge

drink of whisky he had consumed was hot in his veins. He was ready and willing to do battle to any gang of cats in the town. Within a very few minutes Hebe's ears were pierced by the most blood-curdling assortment of feline imprecations and screams of anguish she had ever had the misfortune to hear. Shortly after this outbreak Mr. Lamb, redolent with whisky and with every hair in place, swaggered into the room and resumed his seat with a triumphant flourish of his long, sweeping tail. He looked significantly from his glass to the decanter, then fixed his eyes on Hebe.

"A cup of warm milk would do you a lot more good," his daughter told him.

Mr. Lamb shrank back in his chair and shivered. At the moment he thought it was the worst suggestion he had ever heard. Hebe laughed in spite of herself, so eloquent was her father's disgust. She went to the pantry and returned with a bowl into which she poured a drink appropriate to an occasion of victory.

"Not so loud, major, not so loud," admonished Hebe, as Mr. Lamb once more began his fast and furious lapping. "See if you can't run through the gears without grating."

Mr. Lamb paused a moment to get his breath, looked at his daughter with owlish eyes, then again fell to and did not raise his head until the bowl was dry. Then he staggered into the dining-room and thrusting his face close against the side of the goldfish aquarium, glared in at the turtle. It was an edifying example of drunken futility. The turtle was fast asleep, consequently entirely indifferent to this display of frightfulness. Even had the old fellow been up and stirring he probably would have mistaken Mr. Lamb's terrible face for some new kind of rug or dining-room decoration. Apparently maddened beyond endurance by his recent enemy's unresponsiveness, Mr. Lamb thrust a paw into the tank and roughly mauled the turtle about. Consternation broke out among the goldfish. They darted through the water in wild confusion. This gave Mr. Lamb some slight satisfaction. He would have continued to torment the poor creatures until they were utterly exhausted had not Hebe lured him away with the promise of a drink.

"The mistake you're making," she told him as he was rapidly tucking his grog away, "is that you're trying to drink like a horse when you've only the capacity of a cat."

Mr. Lamb elevated one side of his dripping mouth and mewed scornfully. This, however, was his last demonstration of defiance. When he attempted to mount the stairs he fell asleep on the fifth step, but when Hebe tried to carry him to his room he kicked and wriggled so indignantly that she was forced to put him down. Laboriously, yet with a certain dignity, Mr. Lamb navigated the stairs under his own steam, his daughter helping him occasionally to regain his balance. At the door of his room he paused and leaning against the jamb, nodded gravely at Hebe in token of dismissal. The girl nodded back as gravely, and thus father and daughter parted for the night.

Mr. Lamb achieved the summit of his bed in four desperate leaps, the first three landing him all sprawled out on the floor, but once in bed he was there for good. When Hebe came in to turn out the light he was snoring gently on his pillow.

The next morning he appeared at breakfast with a slight hang-over. Either forgetting he was a cat or not caring whether he was a cat or not, he took his place at the head of the table and looked with favor upon his daughter.

"You're not a very respectable cat," she observed, returning his look rebukingly, "even if you are my father."

For answer he opened his mouth to its fullest extent and protruded his long red tongue, curling the tip ever so slightly, then making it quiver like a leaf. It was a remarkable, but not picturesque spectacle, and Thomas, coming into the dining-room, bent almost double the better to view it.

After breakfast Mr. Lamb was seen dragging the morning paper across the floor to his study where he remained all day alternately reading and sleeping. While he was engaged in the latter Hebe quietly entered and removed the decanter.

"I'll not have a drunken cat raising hell all over the place," she said to herself. "He might get himself all banged up."

At nightfall Mr. Lamb, having wheedled a drink from a not unsympathetic Hebe, made his escape from the house and betook

himself to town. The first person who attracted his attention was Simonds, walking peacefully down the street with his family. Once more the imp of malice ignited Mr. Lamb's imagination. Suppose he should startle Simonds. The idea was no sooner conceived than it was put into execution. Getting a flying start he raced after the unsuspecting Simonds and, leaving the ground with a wild shriek, landed heavily between the man's shoulders, clawing and nuzzling him harmlessly but frantically. The Simondses parted in disorder like pool balls on a table. The purveyor of choice lots pitched headlong to the pavement where he remained in a half-swoon. By the time the crowd had collected Mr. Lamb was well out of it all and gliding snakishly along in the direction of Sandra's dwelling. On the way he encountered a large dog whose heart and soul were wrapped up in the business of regaining some much needed sleep. Mr. Lamb approached the dog and deliberately cuffed him on the side of the head.

Now this was where Mr. Lamb made an error of judgment if not of good taste, for this dog, this slumbering brute of a beast, made a business of cats. He specialized in their destruction. In his dreams he slew cats. In his waking hours he lived his dreams. But Mr. Lamb was ignorant of all this. He desired to put to the test the theory of the nine lives. His curiosity was well rewarded. No sooner was the cuff received than the dog automatically lunged at Mr. Lamb. His movements were swift and sure, his technique flawless. Lamb was smothered beneath the weight of the mighty dog. The world seemed to have turned into a pair of flashing teeth and snapping jaws.

"This," thought Lamb to himself as he crawled between the dog's hind legs, "is decidedly no go. What a mad dog this one turned out to be."

To make matters worse the dog was not without his followers, and these followers now followed Lamb as he sped along the street.

"Nine lives would not be quite enough," he decided, glancing back over his shoulder at the baying rabble at his tail's end. "I'd be four lives short in the jaws of that mob."

It was no laughing matter now. Mr. Lamb was winded and

rapidly losing ground. One of the dogs caught up with him and bowled him over. The pack came thundering down, but Lamb with a desperate wriggle managed to shake off the dog and make a little headway.

From her lawn Sandra was watching with indignation the uneven pursuit of the cat, not knowing it was Mr. Lamb whose life was in peril. She only realized that some poor cat was being unfairly attacked, and her eyes grew bright with anger.

The dogs were upon him now and Lamb, fighting gamely, was borne down beneath their numbers. Then he heard a voice calling and he recognized the voice. Sandra had waded into the seething mass of dogs and was trying to extricate the cat. With his last ounce of energy Mr. Lamb eluded a large red mouth, jumped free from the pack and sprang into the girl's outstretched arms, where he lay panting and completely through. For a few minutes the dogs swirled dangerously round the girl, then gradually and cursingly withdrew before the commanding light in her eyes.

Holding Mr. Lamb close against her breast, she took him to her room and placed him gently on her bed. Later she brought him a bowl of milk which he drank gratefully. After this she undressed and went to bed, the cat being already asleep.

When she awoke a man was lying in bed with her. The man was Mr. Lamb. This was better than a perfect stranger, but still it was not so good. She saw with relief that he was fully dressed, but quite rumpled. She also realized that as far as clothing was concerned, he had the decided advantage of her. Sandra's sleeping arrangements were always of a sketchily attractive nature. She smiled to herself as a thought tickled her mind.

"Well, here I am at last in bed with the man I love," she mused to herself.

Mr. Lamb opened his eyes and looked at her resentfully.

"Whom are you laughing at?" he demanded.

"Oh, nothing," said Sandra. "But the situation, even you must realize, is highly compromising."

Mr. Lamb was about to drift back to sleep without deigning to reply when she dug him in the ribs.

"Don't do that," she said. "You can't sleep here."

Mr. Lamb gave a startled grunt and again eyed her disapprovingly.

"Get out of this bed," said Sandy.

"Why don't you get out?" Mr. Lamb protested. "I don't have to go to work."

"I can't get out," replied Sandy.

"Don't be silly," said Lamb. "I've seen you in less than nothing before."

"That was in my professional capacity," she explained. "This is entirely different."

"Much better," said Mr. Lamb, "so far as I'm concerned."

"And all this time," the girl replied, "someone is probably listening at the door. Mrs. Cummings doesn't object to Hebe sleeping with me, but I doubt if she'd carry her tolerance to the point of granting you the same privilege. She saw me going to bed last night with a cat in my arms. If she saw me going to bed this morning with a man occupying the same relative position, things would be hard to explain. Her mind is not oriental enough to understand."

"Listen," said Mr. Lamb, as his mind reverted to the events of the previous night. "You damn well saved my life."

"And for thanks you crawl into bed with me and compromise practically all that remains of my rep," she replied.

"You deliberately put me in your bed," he retorted.

"But I little realized you were a lamb in cat's clothing," the girl replied.

"Neat but not altogether new," said Lamb. "Slip me a little good-morning kiss and I'll try to get the hell out of here."

"You're forever getting somebody the hell out of somewhere," replied Sandy, throwing two lovely arms round his neck and kissing him in no undecided manner.

"Now get out," she murmured, pushing him from her. "Go and get yourself to hell out of here."

"We'll call this a trial trip," said Mr. Lamb as he eased himself out of bed.

"Pig," said Sandy with glowing eyes.

"Don't call me that," replied Lamb pleadingly. "I might be one at any minute for all I know."

"You'll have to stop being things," said Sandra, "before we can come to terms."

"I know," replied Mr. Lamb, "and I'm praying to God I do."

He went to the window and peered cautiously through one side of the curtain. A long shed roof sloped down almost to the side of the adjoining yard. If he could cross this roof unobserved he might be able to jump into neutral territory. It seemed about the only thing to do.

"I'll have to try it," he said to Sandra. "Are there many people in the back of this house?"

"Only about six or seven possible pairs of eyes, but they should all be fixed on their plates at this hour," she answered easily.

If the truth must be told Sandra did not in the least object to being compromised officially. She was out to get her attenuated Lamb and the sooner she got him divorced the happier she would be. She was abandoned enough to hope that he would be seen when he made his escape from the house.

Mr. Lamb raised the window to its limit and thrust out an inquiring head.

"Hasn't something slipped your memory?" asked the girl in bed.

Lamb came swiftly across the room and gathering Sandra's yielding body in his arms held her against him for a moment, then dropping her suddenly as if she had been an old sack, he slid his long form through the window. At the edge of the roof he gathered himself together and sprang into the air, landing neatly in the next yard right beside a lady engaged in cutting flowers. Luckily the lady's back had been turned when he had made his desperate leap so that she did not have a chance to see his point of departure from the roof.

"Gur-r-r," said the woman, unable to think of anything else to say as she turned round abruptly. "O-o-o-oh, where did you come from?"

"I was just admiring your roses," replied Lamb with his most charming smile.

This remark did much to restore the lady to her usual state of assured rectitude.

"They're not roses?" she said. "They're sweet peas."

"My mistake, madam," apologized Mr. Lamb. "You see I'm rather near-sighted."

The lady regarded Mr. Lamb's eyes for a moment as if they were things of glass. Her expression was entirely unsympathetic.

"Well," she remarked at length, "the next time you want to admire my sweet peas, which you don't seem to be able to tell from roses, don't come creeping up behind me like a thief in the night. You'd get just as much fun staying at home admiring an onion, or a cabbage—it's larger."

Therupon she walked jaggily off down her garden path, and Mr. Lamb, feeling remarkably well in spite of his strenuous encounter with the dogs, returned to his home.

"I always suspected," he observed to himself, "that an investment banker and a second-story man had a great deal in common."

Chapter XVIII. The World's Worst Bootlegger

MELVILLE LONG WAS READY TO PROVE HIMSELF AT LAST. HE WAS now the proud possessor of much bad whisky and gin. A man in the blot was responsible for its quality. In spite of this damning fact the man continued to enjoy deep and unbroken slumber. Already Mr. Long rejoiced in three customers. His heart was hopeful, and Hebe's was in very much the same condition. But Hebe did not know all of her Melville. She had an inkling, but no real knowledge of the profundity of that engaging youth's ignorance of worldly affairs. Everything was set for the initial delivery.

Melville Long had selected his list of prospective customers more or less at random. He prepared it sketchily, according to the appearance of the homes he chanced to pass in his rather purposeless rambles. One house had especially impressed him.

and into this house he had insinuated his ingratiating presence. That this house was the residence of Mr. Brickett, the most important bootlegger within a radius of twenty miles, was unknown to Mr. Long.

Mr. Brickett received his caller with his usual urbanity, believing him to be a new customer. His shock was therefore the greater when Mr. Long offered to sell him an unlimited supply of gin and whisky at a price well below Mr. Brickett's minimum.

Beneath this blow the bootlegger rallied gamely and lent an interested ear to his young competitor's plans. It seemed, according to Mr. Long, that all the bootleggers in the neighborhood were slow and inordinately expensive poisoners. He, Melville Long, was going to put an end to all that. From now on, all other bootleggers would have to reckon with him. He had no doubt that within a month or so they would either move away or give up the game. Now, all of this interested Mr. Brickett a great deal more than Melville Long realized. And the fateful part of the interview was that both of them placed a certain amount of credence in the words of Mr. Long. In this smooth, well-turned-out young gentleman Mr. Brickett saw the potentalities of a dangerous if not successful rival. In himself Mr. Long saw the possible solution of the liquor question, and the longer he listened to himself talk the clearer and closer grew the solution.

The interview ended on a note of mutual confidence and respect, Mr. Brickett requesting Mr. Long to deliver two cases of gin and one of whisky on the evening now at hand. Upon the departure of the budding young bootlegger, Mr. Brickett got in touch with numerous minions of the law who had reason to love him well, and with these same minions arranged a little surprise party for Mr. Long on the evening of his virgin delivery.

It was to this party that Mr. Lamb in a state of blessed ignorance was being driven. He had been told by Hebe that it was to be a mere pleasure trip, a short spin in the cool of the evening. She wanted her father along to lend an atmosphere of eminent respectability to a rather dubious enterprise. And

because she wanted to do well by her father she dropped by and picked up Sandra. Thus they sped with high hopes and hearts aglow to the scene of the treacherous ambush. Mr. Lamb afterwards remarked that the spot should be marked by a double cross.

The car drew up before the residence of Mr. Brickett, and on some flimsy pretext Melville Long, who had been driving, made it known that he had to see a man for a minute. He hurried into the house and was affectionately greeted by the double-dealing Mr. Brickett. If Mr. Long would unload the cases, Mr. Brickett would send some servants to carry them into the house. Mr. Long then returned to the automobile and much to Mr. Lamb's surprise extracted a box from the trunk on the rear of the car. Mr. Brickett's servants, it turned out, wore the livery of the police department, and when Mr. Long hurried forward with the box in his arms he found himself on the point of entrusting its safety to one of these gentlemen.

It can be said for Mr. Long that when light dawned in his mind it dawned with sudden clearness. In a blinding flash he saw and comprehended the situation. With a cry of warning he flung the box into Mr. Lamb's lap—that startled gentleman receiving it with a grunt of pain—and swinging himself to the running board urged Hebe to take the wheel and to drive practically anywhere at the highest attainable speed. The officer of the law dashed forward to lay hands on Melville Long only to be met with that agile youth's foot in the pit of his undefended stomach. As several other officers rushed for the car Hebe got it started and swiftly under way. The chug of a motorcycle apprised them of the fact that they were not to be unaccompanied.

Mr. Lamb removed the box from his lap and carefully placed it on the floor of the speeding car. Then he turned questioning eyes on Sandra.

"Is this to be our habitual method of progress?" he inquired. "Because if it is I'd prefer to alight and to let the merry whirl continue without my superfluous presence."

"Would you leave me here all alone?" demanded Sandra.

"Without a moment's hesitation if you were mad enough to

remain," Mr. Lamb replied. "Of course, I would much prefer your company."

By this time Melville had climbed into the back of the car and was about to join the busily occupied Hebe in the front seat.

"Melville, my boy," asked Mr. Lamb, "may I ask what is in this box that made that officer so angry?"

"It's just his way," muttered Long, struggling forward to hide his confusion. "They're all that way, Mr. Lamb. Don't mind them."

"I wouldn't mind them in the least," Mr. Lamb replied, "if they didn't display such feverish interest in us."

By this time the telephone in Mr. Brickett's home had been pressed into active service. The key points throughout the country and the state were warned to be on the lookout for Mr. Lamb's automobile, the license number of which was given with a businesslike description of the automobile itself and its occupants.

Hebe had wheeled into a rough dirt road, and for a few minutes they thought they had lost the motorcycle policeman, but as she stopped the car to enable Long to change places with her they heard a faint but persistent throbbing behind them. Looking back they made out the motorcycle and its implacable rider bounding along in the distance. Both were having rough going of it.

Then began a grim chase which Mr. Lamb to this day views with alarm and disapproval. On the rutted dirt road they more than held their own with the motorcycle, but when this road abruptly deposited them on a main thoroughfare, the persevering policeman began to gain. And when the road eventually placed them in the dead center of a thriving village they were indeed in great trouble, because it was here that two state troopers, also equipped with motorcycles, joined the chase. These alert and determined gentlemen were of a different caliber from that of the flying motor's former nemesis. They believed in producing revolvers and pointing them at things. The sound of shooting brought joy to their hearts, and they now began to enjoy themselves to their hearts' content. As the

automobile hurriedly cleared the town they yanked out their gats and gave the party ahead what is sometimes known as what for, or a piece of their collective minds. The revolvers spoke eloquently in Mr. Lamb's ears. He heard the whistle of bullets going by at full speed and he knew that those self-same bullets were busily looking for them. This knowledge brought him scant satisfaction.

"Our two new escorts," he observed to his daughter, "seem to have an even greater capacity for anger than that other chap. Do you know why they're trying to murder us all?"

"Well, major," his daughter called back to him, "this automobile happens to be loaded to the scuppers with gin and whisky, and it seems that our guilty secret is known to practically the entire universe."

"I knew nothing about it," replied Mr. Lamb, lurching heavily against Sandra.

"You're the practically part," said Hebe. "Now everybody knows except possibly an old gentleman on the extreme peak of Mount Shasta."

"Does it so happen," continued Mr. Lamb, as the automobile skidded around a corner and the shooting died away, "that a few samples are lying within easy reach?"

Hebe produced a bottle from a side pocket and passed it to her father. Mr. Lamb received the gin with undisguised relief.

"I might as well be poisoned as shot," he remarked, raising the bottle to his lips. "If I must meet death face to face I'd prefer to be wearing a broad, fatuous smile."

"You're not alone in your preference," said Sandy. "My throat is parched with panic."

Mr. Lamb handed her the bottle.

"No foolishness, remember," he warned her. "This is to be serious drinking."

Sandra gulped a few swallows of extremely vile gin, relinquished the bottle to Hebe and turned her deep, passionate eyes on the man at her side.

"I'd love to meet death with you," she murmured. "With your kiss on my lips and our bullet-riddled bodies locked in a last embrace."

"Bleeding profusely from every pore," added Mr. Lamb. "Hebe, pass me that bottle quickly. This woman is turning me numb."

Mr. Lamb drank deeply, clinging with one hand to the swaying car. Sandra relieved him of the bottle and followed his example. Melville Long was too busy to drink. If there was one thing that young man knew it was roads. In his own roadster he had explored the highways and byways of the entire state. He was in the way of being an animated road map. He now called on his knowledge and played a little trick on the state troopers, still hidden from view by a bend in the road.

Turning the car sharply, he drove it at full speed up what appeared to be a private driveway leading to a farmhouse. The road curved round the house and continued surprisingly on through a field of corn, down a short but steep incline, followed the arc of a meadow, and at last lost itself in the shadows of a forest. It was not a road for a large, heavy automobile, but Mr. Long made it so today. Once in the forest he stopped the car and silently took the bottle from Hebe. When he removed it from his lips it was good only for disposal. Hebe produced another one and passed it back to her father. Melville Long got out and listened. For the moment they seemed safe from pursuit.

"The rear mudguards have been dented by five bullets, and there are two holes in the body," he anounced with his usual optimistic smile. "It's lucky they didn't hit the trunk. The thing's full of grog."

"An act of God," breathed Sandra.

Daylight was growing thin, and the late summer night was about to open for business. Mr. Lamb was making inroads in the new bottle. The gin was taking effect. He could hardly have felt better.

"Melville," he asked, "would you mind telling me the name of that near customer of yours? A shade of memory has just passed across my rapidly receding brain."

"Name of Brickett," Long answered a little bitterly. "Seemed to be a pleasant sort of man."

"Oh, he is," Mr. Lamb continued. "He's one of the pleasant-

est and most progressive bootleggers in the neighborhood. I've done business with him myself."

An expression of infinite pity welled up in Hebe's eyes as she regarded her future husband.

"Darling," she said, "you've proved yourself far beyond any reasonable doubt, and what you've proved is that you're the world's worst bootlegger barring none."

"I'm not even that," the young man answered moodily. "Haven't sold even one bottle yet. Didn't ever get started."

"And what, may I ask, was the reason for all this illicit enterprise?" asked Mr. Lamb.

Melville looked helplessly at Hebe, and she put her hand on his.

"Well, you see, major," she explained. "We were trying to get married and it was all my faut. I suggested the idea to this billiard ball with a view to obtaining quick and ample funds. I thought it would be better than his just doing nothing. He absolutely refused to ruin me."

Mr. Lamb looked at the pair with sad, reproachful eyes.

"He's absolutely ruined me," he said at last. "And between you you have made us all eligible for full membership in the Atlanta Country Club. Your short cut to matrimony leads but to the jug. If you succeed in getting me out of this fix alive I'll carry you both in my arms to the nearest church and not leave the place until you are married to a turn."

"Let's have a drink on that," suggested Sandy. "It sounds like a sporting proposition to me."

The second bottle went the way of the first, and a third was pressed into service. This time they switched to whisky with the aid of a corkscrew attached to a versatile pocket knife in the possession of Melville Long. Merely as a matter of interest Mr. Lamb also sampled this unworthy liquor, then leaned back against the seat.

"Damn the torpedoes," he quoted to his probable son-in-law. "Get me back to my bed, and I'll settle a fortune on Hebe."

He rested his head on Sandra's shoulder and became a very quiet and contented man. As the car sped through the woods slumber claimed him for her own. Sandra, too, for lack of any-

thing better to do, dropped into a light sleep, and failed to notice how heavy the head on her shoulder was growing. Hebe and Long kept their eyes to the front.

Some time later, when the automobile drew up at an innocent-looking roadside garage to replenish the nearly exhausted supply of gasoline, the pair continued sleeping. Nor did either sleeper awake until the sound of coarse, commanding voices penetrated their remoteness.

Sandra sat up with a start only to find that the automobile was completely surrounded by state troopers. She turned to Mr. Lamb to inform him of this disheartening fact, then stopped with her mouth open.

"Hebe," she said in a low voice, "just turn round and look at your father."

Hebe stopped insulting the state troopers and obeyed Sandra's urgent request. Her mouth also hung suspended. Then she closed it and swallowed hard several times. Mr. Lamb woke up and looked helplessly about him. He knew he was something else again, but for the life of him he could not make out what it was.

"Come out of there," an unpleasant voice broke in. "We want to search the back of this car."

The man thrust in an inquiring head, then immediately abandoned his inquiry. It is to be questioned if any man ever changed his plans so swiftly and radically. His head was no sooner in than it was out. And no sooner was it out than his voice made horrid sounds.

"May God save us all," he announced. "They've got a live lion in the back of that car"—and leaping on the nearest motorcycle, he disappeared down the road.

"So that's what I am," thought Mr. Lamb with a thrill of pride. "Well, here's where I assert myself to the limit of my capacity."

With an ear-splitting roar of mock rage, he jumped heavily to the road and scattered disorder among the troopers. Some of them left on foot, some of them left on motorcycles, some of them seemed to have discarded both methods of leaving in favor of flying. The fact remains that where there was once

a compact little gathering of state troopers, there was now not a single trooper. A few abandoned motorcycles remained behind, but had it not been for these there was no evidence that a state trooper had ever been within miles of the spot. High up on the top of the gasoline pump the garage owner looked on the scene of desolation and felt very lonely indeed. Nor would he come down in spite of the urgings of Sandra and Hebe and the apparent amiability of the lion. They left the man aloft, and drove noisily down the road, everyone talking at once save Mr. Lamb, who was practicing up on his growls and modestly receiving the congratulations of his three companions in flight.

Then Melville Long, without much effort, conceived another bright idea. He drove swiftly and directly to the seacoast—to a place of sand and pines where a secluded hotel quietly dreamed away a peaceful, fragrant existence among the trees that forever held in their arms the far-off throb of the surf. The lights were out in the hotel when the automobile rolled up the gravel drive. They had previously decided what they were going to do with Mr. Lamb. The lion was to become a dog. They figured out exactly how to do it. Mr. Lamb alone was skeptical. He failed to see how he could compress himself into a dog no matter how hard he squeezed. However, since the party had decided to make a dog of him, he was perfectly willing to coöperate to the best of his ability. It had taken nearly half a case of liquor to get him into this pliable frame of mind. He was now a trifle unsteady on his feet. Instead of stepping quietly out of the automobile he fell through the door held open by Sandra, and spread himself over the drive.

"Come on, major," pleaded Hebe. "This will never do. Wait till we get our rooms."

The thought of a comfortable bed gave the lion the strength to rise. Then began the transformation. As if they had previously rehearsed the scene each member of the party bore down on Mr. Lamb with an automobile robe. In these they completely muffled him. Even Melville Long's raincoat was pressed into service.

"Now squeeze yourself together, major," his daughter urged

him. "That's the boy. Squeeze hard, hump your back and walk low to the ground."

The young lady was red with exertion as she tied the robes about the contorted form of the lion. From time to time Sandra was forced to retire as her mirth got the better of her. Low pants and grunts issued from the lion. Only his nose and eyes were now visible, his tail having been firmly strapped to his stomach. From the blankets his eyes peered out wistfully—hopefully—upon his three companions. Sandy could not meet those eyes bearing the mute question of, "Do I look much like a dog?"

When she had finished her operations, Hebe stepped back and surveyed her handiwork.

"He doesn't look much like a dog," she admitted, "but then again, he doesn't look much like a lion, and after all that's what we want."

"He doesn't look like anything else on the face of God's world," pronounced Melville Long. "We've got as much right to call him a dog as any other animal."

"Now, major," continued Hebe, "remember this, and for heaven's sake don't laugh. You're a sick dog and an extremely self-effacing one. You're shy and you don't like strangers. Now show us how you can walk. Just think of a beetle and crawl along."

Thinking hard of a beetle, Mr. Lamb crouched to the ground and, hunching up to his utmost, took a few trial steps. The effect was irresistible. It was heightened by the obvious earnestness of the lion. The three witnesses of this odd scene sat down on the running-board of the automobile and clung to their stomachs. Sandra was aching all over. And when the lion peered wanly back at them over his shoulder for some indication of approval, she collapsed into Hebe's arms.

"Come on everybody," said Hebe in a low voice. "I've taken a lot of trouble with that lion, now we've got to get him in. That will do very well, major," she continued, going over to the crouched and muffled object. "Just keep up the harmless deception till we reach our rooms."

Collecting several suitcases containing nothing but gin and

whisky, Long rang the hotel night bell and waited on the broad veranda until a light appeared in the reception room. When a sleepy-eyed clerk with bushy hair and a large, smooth, well-fed face appeared at the door, the young man made known his needs and was invited to enter with his party.

"Ah, yes," Long said to the clerk in as nonchalant a voice as he could muster when the robed lion made his mincing entrance. "I'd forgotten our most important member—one sick dog. I take personal charge of him myself."

From behind his counter the clerk looked in astonishment at Mr. Lamb, who cast his eyes down and gazed demurely at the floor.

"Do you say that's a dog?" the clerk demanded.

Melville Long laughed falsely as Hebe bent over her father and gave him a pat of encouragement.

"Of course he's a dog," put in Sandy. "What would you call him if he isn't a dog?"

"Well, miss," replied the clerk thoughtfully, "I don't rightly know just what I'd call him. He's unlike anything I ever saw before, or ever hope to see again. Are you certain he's all right? This is a very quiet hotel, you know. It's a sort of retreat for nervous persons—wrecks."

Everyone, including Mr. Lamb, felt that they had come to the right place. As Melville Long was signing the register in such a way that Hebe became his sister and Sandra Rush her friend, Mr. Lamb suddenly remembered his daughter's admonition about laughing. No sooner had he remembered this than he was seized with an uncontrollable desire to laugh. His legs gave way completely, and, sinking to the floor, his body shook with suppressed mirth as a gasping noise escaped his lips.

With blotter in hand the clerk forgot every other consideration in his interest in the convulsed animal.

"What's wrong with him now?" he asked.

Long, studiously averting his eyes from the great, quivering hulk at his feet, looked impassively at the clerk.

"A bit of a chill, I guess," he replied. "It's the night air. A

very delicate dog, that, and an expensive one. Only a few in captivity—I mean, only a few grow to manhood."

"Or attain their majority," put in Hebe sarcastically.

She bent tenderly down over the now hysterical lion and gave him a vicious jab in the ribs, from which the poor creature grunted so explosively that the clerk jumped back.

"There, there, Fifi," she said. "Be a good doggie or you'll get no nice warm medicine to make you sleep."

At the inappropriate appellation of Fifi, Sandra broke down completely. Throwing her arms on the counter she hid her head in them and rocked her body to and fro in agony. The clerk scratched his mop of a head in perplexity, looked closely at the register, then giving everything up as hopeless, led the way to the rooms.

This entailed the mounting of several flights of stairs, a difficult task for Mr. Lamb in his present strapped and highly compressed condition. To add to his discomfort his robes began to slip off, and Hebe and Sandra were forced to hold them on as he dragged himself up the interminable stairs. Once the clerk looked back, and the sight he caught of the straining lion was enough to keep him from looking back again.

When finally the door had closed behind the mystified man, Mr. Lamb burst his bonds and lay exhausted on the floor. Sandra flung herself on the bed and Hebe sank down in a chair. Melville Long alone retained his composure. Quickly opening a suitcase, he extracted a bottle of whisky which he deftly uncorked and thrust into Mr. Lamb's mouth, holding it there until its contents were half drained. From the bed came a series of muffled gasps. Sandra was still at it. Revived by the whisky, Mr. Lamb, trailing robes behind him, walked to the bed and gently spanked the prostrate form of Sandra. Gentle as it was, the spanking was sufficiently firm to bring her back to sobriety. She sat upon the bed, then suddenly threw her arms round the lion's neck.

"Fifi!" she cried. "Fifi, us girls must stick together."

Mr. Lamb drew back and, looking at his daughter, made it clear by a wave of his paw that he desired to retire. Sandra was all for sleeping with her Fifi, but compromised with tuck-

ing him into bed. This he permitted her to do with bad grace.

"I don't quite like sleeping with a drunken lion, even though he is your father," Melville Long told Hebe in a low voice. "He's gentle enough now, but suppose he should dream he was back in the jungle? He might make a meal out of me and never even remember it."

"The major," replied Hebe with dignity, "is very careful about the quality of the food he consumes. One bite out of you, and his jaws would automatically cease to function."

With this little parting speech Hebe led Sandra to their own room. Sandra blew a kiss to her Fifi, who gazed back at her with large, glassy eyes.

In spite of the precautions taken by Hebe the next morning to lock the sleeping lion in before they went down to breakfast, the chambermaid, after repeated knocking, entered the room with no difficulty by means of her master key. It is to be doubted if even God clearly understood her prayer so incoherent were her ideas when she pulled down the rumpled bed clothing and came face to face with a lion. Even then she did not move. The terrible sight had robbed her limbs of volition. It was not until the lion awoke and gave her a lazy cuff on a place usually associated with juvenile chastisement that she thought about going. As she left the room her limbs moved jerkily as if she were walking with snowshoes attached to her feet.

"There's a lion in 46," she informed the clerk. "He's asleep and he has a mouth."

The day clerk smiled indulgently at the maid's terror, the night clerk having omitted to give him an account of the late arrivals of the previous night.

"Yes, I know," he replied soothingly. "There's an elephant in 82. Go up and give him his bath."

The maid liked her job, so she did not stop to argue, but within a surprisingly short time a rumor was circulated about that among its other distinguished guests the hotel also entertained a lion. Support was given to this rumor when at noontime an order was telephoned from 46 to send up half a dozen large steaks. The order was duly delivered and consumed, but

the waiter who delivered the steaks had no opportunity to see the consumer. When Sandra, Hebe, and Mr. Long appeared in the dining-room for luncheon the kitchen was thrown into an even more feverish state of speculation. A sick dog, no matter how rapid his recovery, could not possibly eat six large steaks. Therefore it stood to reason that the dog was not a dog at all but a lion.

For the remainder of the afternoon Sandra read the newspaper to Mr. Lamb, who alternately drank and drowsed. When it was about time for dinner she departed, promising to provide bountifully for him on her return. Not being Hebe, she forgot to lock the door.

It did not take many minutes for Mr. Lamb to become terribly, terribly lonely. He crawled out of his bed and wondered what he could do with himself.

"Can't do much with a lion," he thought discontentedly. "Nobody wants you around. Nobody understands."

Then his eyes, falling on the suitcase, brightened a shade.

"Might as well drink," he continued. "Left here alone. Nothing to do. Don't want to drink, but it seems I must."

He opened the suitcase and pawed out a bottle of gin, the whisky being beyond his powers because of the cork. Then he deftly lipped out the stopper and, taking the bottle well into his mouth, swung his head aloft. A river of raw gin ran down his great throat, not without causing him some keen physical discomfort. Nevertheless he took his punishment with fortitude until the river ceased to flow, after which he sat down to think; this in the case of a none too sober lion is not at all a good thing to do. He had been cooped up in the house all day. A bit of a walk would do him a world of good. It was dark now and almost everybody was dressing for dinner, his party having gone down early in order to tend to his needs. He did not doubt for a minute that he could get himself out of the hotel without being observed by a single human eye.

Mr. Lamb went to the door and tried the knob. It turned easily under the pressure of his paws. He was out of the room in a moment. Now, the hall was a narrow hall, and Mr. Lamb had been perfectly right in assuming that the majority of the

guests of the hotel would be in their rooms dressing for dinner. Another thing, Mr. Lamb's tail was long and large. And this long tail thumped imperatively against the doors on either side, as Mr. Lamb made his stately progress down the hall. It was an interesting study of human reactions to the unexpected presence of a lion.

The first summons of the lion's tail was answered by an elderly gentleman wearing horn-rimmed glasses and an undershirt. To this gentleman Mr. Lamb bowed apologetically. For a moment the old fellow did not stir. He peered myopically at the lion as if disbelieving the evidence of his eyes, then closed the door slowly as suspicion grew to certainty. The other guests were more expeditious in their reactions. One lady hurrying out to dinner unfortunately received the lion's tail full in the pit of her stomach and was toppled to the floor. Her terror was heightened by Mr. Lamb's elaborate attempts to show her that the whole incident had been purely accidental. Her screams caused other doors to open, and the lion was discovered in the act of what appeared to be an attack on a prostrate woman, but which in reality was nothing more than a courteous endeavor to make gentlemanly reparations for an unavoidable occurrence.

What had once been a mysterious rumor now became an appalling fact. Few guests appeared at dinner that night. They preferred to remain hungry but safe behind locked and barricaded doors. Not quite satisfied with this precaution some of the more painstaking guests were later unwillingly hauled forth from under beds and the depths of closets.

During this brief period the hotel was decidedly no place for nervous people, athough it was occupied by many.

Not altogether unaware of the disturbance he had created, Mr. Lamb made an exit through a side door and was now wandering pensively about in the pines. At last he came to the sea and poised himself on a rock. It was a beautiful night —a night of stars, silence, and beguiling breezes laden with the healing scent of salt and pine.

A man and a maid, new to the place, but obviously not to each other, were walking along the beach.

"What a lovely spot for a statue," exclaimed the maid, pointing to the lion motionless on the rock.

"Funny," said the man, "we haven't seen it on any of the picture post-cards."

They hurried up to the lion and examined it in the darkness.

"Remarkably lifelike," murmured the maid.

"And so are you," said the man, leaning against the lion's flank and taking the maid in his arms.

Mr. Lamb promptly sat down and the couple slid to the rocks.

"Did you push it over?" asked the maid.

"God, no," whispered the man. "The damn thing's alive."

After this they covered their heads and lay perfectly still, each one wondering about how much of the other remained undevoured. When at last they gathered enough courage to look up, the lion was gone. That night they conducted themselves with a certain amount of discretion.

Mr. Lamb found the hotel in a condition of frantic activity. During his absence the state troopers had appeared, this time fortified with a machine-gun. He was just in time to see his automobile bearing Hebe, Sandra, and Long dash madly down the driveway. Troopers were rushing from all directions, and the machine-gun was brought into action. The troopers had no intention of getting too close to the lion they assumed to be in the car.

And Mr. Lamb was equally reluctant to be left alone with a machine-gun and a chorus of state troopers. He longed for the company of his friends. Casting dignity to the winds, he uttered a loud roar of protest and doubling his body under him made the gravel fly.

"Run, lion, run," he urged himself. "Prove yourself now."

Gravel sprayed out behind him. His tail was close to the ground. This did not prevent it from being slightly nicked by a machine-gun bullet.

The car was waiting for him at the end of the drive, and without stopping for the formality of opening the door he lurched over the side. The automobile jumped ahead and continued hurriedly along the road.

"Off again, major," said Sandra resignedly. "How's your head?"

Mr. Lamb was not worrying about his head. His thoughts lay with his tail.

"Not a scrap of evidence left behind," Mr. Long optimistically informed the party. "I lugged both suitcases out. Open a bottle, Hebe."

Chapter XIX. Above the Battle

SANDRA LOOKED UP FROM HER DRUM.

"It's a shame we haven't a camera," she observed.

It was.

Mr. Lamb was lying majestically beside an uprooted tree. Its reaching branches still drew vital sap that nourished fresh green leaves. The tawny coat of the lion was splashed with pointed shadows. They shifted over the great, still body as small, inquisitive breezes searched through the arms of the fallen tree.

Round the tip of the lion's tail was bound a once dainty but now bedraggled brassière. Undoubtedly it had once been becoming to its wearer. Despite this fact it failed to add to the dignity of the lion. Sandra had insisted on sacrificing this restraining influence for the protection of the bullet-chipped tail.

The silence of the forest was unbroken save by the sporadic throbbing of the drum upon which Sandra practiced when the spirit moved her. The sound of the drum lent a barbaric note to this already sufficiently fantastic woodland scene.

Through a rift in the trees a green world unrolled far below them. The slanting sun sent a flood of gold along the path of a winding river. There were farmhouses down there, pasturelands and meadows. The quiet of evening seemed to have fallen over forest, field, and farm. From where they were sitting they looked the clouds in the face. Caught in the rays of the setting sun they fell burning down the sky.

Mr. Long was wandering leggily about in his drawers. Sandra and Hebe, from half to two-thirds naked themselves, were sitting cross-legged on the ground and endeavoring to make up for their lack of raiment by fashioning garlands of wild flowers for their hair. Sandra had promised the lion one for himself, but the lion without troubling to move his massive head merely rolled his large, disapproving eyes in her direction, then returned to the contemplation of the gold and green world in which he found himself.

All had been well rained upon. A heavy shower had wet them to the skin. Garments both dainty and ludicrous were decorating the limbs of neighboring trees.

"I find it fresh as the deuce," complained Melville Long, shivering convincingly in his drawers.

"Break out the last case," suggested Hebe. "Your clothes will soon be dry."

At this suggestion the lion moved his head. Turning it to his daughter he nodded gravely several times, as an indication of his unqualified agreement. Sandra laid aside her garland and, picking up her drumsticks, made an enthusiastic noise.

The beating of the drum throbbed weirdly through the silence of the forest. From afar a wandering naturalist heard the broken rhythm and pictured again in his mind's eye a certain clearing in a jungle on a distant tropic isle.

"Strange sound to hear in this part of the world," he thought aloud, as he put some utterly useless-looking stones into his pack and resumed his way.

Back on the mountain top Hebe was asking questions.

"What becomes of the major's clothes when he turns into things?" she demanded.

The lion looked interested. This subject touched him vitally.

"What becomes of all of him?" asked Sandra. "His clothes must go the way of all flesh."

"No," said Hebe. "His arms and legs and things turn into the corresponding parts of the animal he's exploiting at the moment, but it's different with his clothes. They have to go somewhere because they always come back."

Sandra puzzled over this problem a few minutes, then her face brightened.

"I know what becomes of his clothes," she announced. "They naturally turn into fur, feathers, or scales as the case may be."

"But there's his skin to be considered," replied Hebe.

Mr. Lamb did not entirely approve of the drift of the conversation. To him it seemed hardly proper that these two young ladies should sit there as if he were not present, and dispassionately consider his skin and the various parts of his body. He gave a low cough of protest, but the girls continued.

"His skin remains his skin," Sandra explained. "Sometimes stretched, at others shrunken. His clothes merely form the decoration."

"Well, I wish to God I could get my hand in the pockets of his trousers right now," Melville Long put in earnestly.

His wish was fathered by the realization that the money in his own trousers pockets was running low. Only an emergency fund remained, a small one.

To obtain food and supplies they had been forced to resort to rather high-handed methods. These methods had been as simple as they were successful. Mr. Lamb had merely presented himself at the local country store in the little village at the base of the mountain. He did not have long to wait. Everybody went away just as soon as they could and stayed away. Sandra then appeared with a list prepared by the efficient Hebe, and with this list before her deliberately selected the articles desired.

The drum had not been among the items on the slip of paper. The drum had been left behind by a member of the local band. Its existence had completely slipped his memory in the press of departure. One of Sandra's many suppressed desires had always been the mastery of the drum, so seeing one conveniently at hand she made it her own. Some day she promised herself, she would also take up the fife. One thing at a time. Beating the drum very badly indeed, but with great contentment she had preceded the lion through the village and up the mountainside. The lion had carried the bundle of pro-

visions. Through the slits in their blinds the village's entire population had reviewed this incredible procession with bewitched eyes and prayed quite fundamentally to their variously conceived God. Needless to say both the lion and the lady were slightly drunk—not much, but just enough to make them believe they were convulsingly amusing.

For five days now they had been, as it were, on location. Having found the seacoast inhospitable they had gone to the other extreme and taken to the mountains. Through the uncanny driving of Mr. Long and the presence of Mr. Lamb they had eluded the state troopers, but not entirely escaped their memory. The automobile had been left concealed at the base of the mountain, but already, unknown to its owners, it had been discovered and reported. Several intrepid troopers had reconnoitered the position of the fugitives, and certain plans were at this moment well under way.

All these developments would have been highly disturbing to the lion and his three companions, happy as they were in their false security, had they but been aware of them.

That night they finished the last bottle of whisky and ingeniously hid the remaining case of gin in a hollow tree. Mr. Long was now taking no chances. He had agreed to get them alive out of the mess into which he had plunged them. No less than the sun-tanned hand of Hebe depended upon the success of his endeavors.

The lion placed his head on the fallen tree and stretched his massive limbs. A whistling sigh escaped his lips. Sandra, trailing an automobile robe, crept close to him and rested her head on a soft spot just back of his left foreleg. From within the body of the lion came the strong, steady beat of his great heart. The sound of it gave the girl a feeling of confidence and safety. Once she tickled his ribs, and the lion, raising his head from the leaves, gently but firmly nipped the ear that had been the cause of so much trouble. Sandra gave a little scream and draped her arms round the lion's neck.

On the other side of the embers Hebe vainly attempted to interest Mr. Long in her plans. Mr. Long strove manfully to listen to the prattling girl, but sleep was among those things

that he held most sacred. The last thing he remembered was a long string of unpleasant names that Hebe was muttering monotonously in his ear. The sound of her voice helped to lull him off to sleep.

In the darkness of the forest, one of the lion's large yellow eyes shone brightly as if it were reflecting the beams from a sharply chisled star, hanging directly overhead above the trees. Silence . . . only the voice of Sandra singing softly to the lion.

"Hebe," she whispered suddenly. "How's this: the lion and the lamb lie down together—actually in one."

"A little too pat to be funny," replied Hebe. "Tell that great hulk of an animal good night for me. My little prize package has gone by-by."

"So has mine," said Sandra, and presently she emulated his example.

According to his custom Mr. Lamb arose at dawn next morning and took a stroll through the forest. He knew of a certain mountain stream in which he could partially submerge his body. It was a refreshing thing to do in the quiet of the morning. He would lie there and listen to the birds and allow an old squirrel to examine him from a safe distance. Each morning the distance had decreased. Today the old fellow was almost familiar.

Mr. Lamb lay quite still and let the water swirl and chuckle about his haunches. No trains to catch. No bonds to sell. No orderly rows of houses. No meaningless words to say. Not even the sound of a motorcar or the smell of gasoline. Lamb's nerves were resting, taking on a protective coating of fat. He realized now that his life with Sapho had never been restful. There had always been a debilitating undercurrent of irritation. No room for laughter and heedless relaxation. No delirious unleashing of passion. No companionship in sleep. Like so many secretively immoral women, she had hidden her true nature behind a screen of diffidence and niceness. With her one could never be vulgarly natural any more than one could be self-forgetfully passionate. She was bad without knowing how to be bad. Life had entered her only a little way. It had never really settled in her body nor given animation

to her brain. He himself had been only half alive. He had accepted things altogether too easily, and too consistently avoided trouble. Perhaps if he had been different Sapho would have been different. However, he knew for certain that he never could have brought himself to mingle with the Woodbine Players or to talk symbolically about sex as if he were actually feeling it with his hands. The thought of sex brought Sandra to his mind. There was a woman—sex with lightness and laughter and with other skylights of interest to let the sunshine through.

Thinking of this beautiful, bare-armed young sinner, the lion rose so abruptly that he startled the squirrel into a frenzy of precautionary measures. It was high time the camp awoke. Shaking the glinting beads of water from his flanks he passed with a consciousness of nobility and power between the trees.

The camp was empty—deserted. No clothing hung from the limbs of the trees. Even the automobile robes were gone. With growing suspicion and alarm the lion nosed about the place. The world which had been so cheerfully ordered only a few minutes ago was now a wilderness of vast discontent. Then his eyes fell on a note pinned to a tree. It had been scrawled hastily and was signed by Hebe. Mr. Lamb read:

> Surprised and captured. The big stiffs are taking us to Brookford to visit the judge. Rescue suggested. They have no evidence, the crooks! . . . Curses.
>
> HEBE

Then the lion descended from the mountain. As he crashed through the trees and sprang to the road he was a sight to inspire terror in the hardiest of souls. An automobile passing casually by stalled within a foot of the lion, then started again and went into reverse. Mr. Lamb did not even notice the car. Hebe had suggested rescue, and he fully intended to act on her suggestion. Was he not the monarch of all he surveyed? Or was that title a mere piece of flattery. He would soon find out. With powerful strides he disappeared down the road to Brookford, some five miles distant.

A lion is seldom crowded, that is, a lion on the loose. Round

him one usually finds a considerable quantity of unoccupied territory. As Mr. Lamb passed down the main street of Brookford no one got in his way. What traffic there was withdrew to the pavements or turned into side streets. An earnest gentleman drove his car clear through the front window of a furniture store, where he partially concealed himself beneath the ruins of a completely demolished bed. A horse harnessed to a farm wagon was found later in the wagon itself, and had to be driven home by a more courageous steed.

Utterly ignoring the small furor he was occasioning, Mr. Lamb padded down the street and entered the court-house in front of which he recognized his parked automobile. Behind his ponderous desk the judge was having a hard time establishing a case against the youthful prisoners. He was rapidly losing heart. No liquor had been found in the car or at the camp, no liquor had ever been delivered or actually seen. On a charge of bootlegging he could find no plausible grounds for holding them for general sessions. He was beginning to dislike state troopers as heartily as those they had captured and dragged to court without a scrap of evidence. For the twentieth time the judge was trying to discover what had become of the liquor.

"Now, miss," he was saying, "what did you say your name was?"

"Doon," replied Hebe promptly, "Lorna Doon."

"Well, Miss Doon," continued the judge—who officially was not a judge at all but merely a recorder and not as *au courant* as he might have been—"your face looks honest enough. Why don't you help us out and tell us what you did with the liquor?"

"Why should I help you out to help us in?" asked Hebe with her sweetest smile.

The judge looked annoyed and shifted his discouraged eyes to Sandra.

"Will you make a clean breast of it?" he demanded.

"Why, your honor," said Sandra, dropping her eyes. "What a thing to ask!"

"What do you mean?" asked the judge uneasily.

"I wouldn't like to say," the girl replied.

"Do you know what you did with the liquor?" repeated the judge, his face growing gradually red as he gazed into Sandra's eyes now alarmingly raised to his.

"In view of the fact that we drank the liquor, your honor, your question seems rather indelicate," the modest young lady replied.

At this moment a deep growl sounded in the rear of the courtroom. This growl was followed by a general and concentrated drive on the windows on the part of every single spectator present. The judge was about to rap for order when he stopped with gavel poised in mid-air as he found himself gazing into the open mouth of an enraged lion. Never had he seen such a furious animal, and never had he felt less like seeing one. Abandoning his prisoners to the lion and the mercy of God, he withdrew with his attendants to his chambers where he speedily produced a bottle of his own and did what any sensible man would have done under the circumstances.

The lion and his grateful companions wandered round the deserted courtroom for a few minutes, then emerged from the building into the equally deserted street. Leisurely climbing into the automobile, they drove off unmolested. Nor were they molested throughout the remainder of their journey back to their original point of departure, the Lamb residence —a place which its owner had come to fear he might never see again.

"Pardon our lion, Thomas," said Hebe breezily, as the aged servant hurried out to meet them. "He's not a bad sort at all if you like lions."

"Never had much of a chance to get acquainted," replied Thomas. "Is there anything I can do for this one, Miss Hebe?"

"Yes," said Hebe. "Give the poor creature all the meat you can find either alive or dead in the kitchen. He's been eating beans for the last five days, and he might start in on us if we don't do something about it."

Thomas hurried away, and Mr. Lamb went to show himself to the turtle, who as usual was not impressed.

Chapter XX. A Decidedly Different Something

FOR SOME WEEKS NOW MR. LAMB HAD BEEN QUITE HIMSELF. This morning he wished he was not, for he was presently due at court to defend himself in a divorce suit brought against him by the revengeful Sapho. That gracious lady was at last striking for freedom. And she was striking in the worst possible way so far as Mr. Lamb was concerned. The summons had informed him that he should be both ready and willing to defend himself against charges of aggravated adultery, witchcraft, animalism, mental anguish, attempted murder, torture, and non-support. When Lamb read the official wording of the disagreeable document his brain swam. He had never before realized he had been such a versatile blackguard. How that woman must have suffered! And how she was going to let the world know about it!

Sandra Rush had been named as the other half of the adultery charge, and although she was most uninterestingly innocent she was highly satisfied with the trend of events. Her conduct greatly added to Mr. Lamb's uneasiness. She assumed that she was an adulteress and acted the part so well that the poor man began to believe it must be true. Frequently she spoke of their guilty love with downcast eyes and generously declared that she fully intended to share at least half of the blame. When Mr. Lamb appealed to her better nature she accused him of trying to cast her aside like a broken reed and swore violently to God that she would sue him for chronic assault, seduction, and breach of promise. As his own daughter stoutly supported Sandra's charges he held his peace and relapsed into sweating silence. It was all terribly upsetting.

Mr. Lamb had received notice of the divorce on the morning after his return from the mountains. He had awakened that morning quite himself and fully clad. His clothes were in a state of great disorder, and a week's growth of whiskers

decorated his face. When he had finished reading the document he somehow wished himself back on the quiet, wind-fanned summit of that mountain retreat where life had been so pleasantly natural and simplified. Already the newspapers were beginning to discuss the amazing charges brought by the wife of a prominent financier against her husband. Apparently this much-sinned-against woman was willing to take the reporters into her confidence at any hour of the day or night. Almost overnight Mr. Lamb had become a national figure. His picture appeared in various papers, but not so large as Mrs. Lamb's.

Only one ray of light penetrated the encircling gloom. Nothing had developed from the bootlegging charge. It seemed that the recorder's report must have been of a nature to discourage further investigation. Flarebacks of this episode also appeared in print. Mr. Lamb's name and that of Sandra Rush were still more firmly linked. The fact that the woman in the case was an underwear model was not neglected. News was scarce at that time, and Mr. Lamb and his affairs were received with thanks by the press.

Hebe and Melville Long accompanied Mr. Lamb to the court. Sandra refused to appear, feeling that her absence would give the impression of an admission of guilt. Looking insinuatingly at Mr. Lamb she assured him that she could never face the world after all that had taken place between them. An expression of indignant protest escaped Mr. Lamb's lips.

"That night you escaped from my window," whispered Sandy. "Wow!"

"Ah!" said Hebe with a deep intake of breath.

"For God's sake, Hebe," her father pleaded. "Don't you see that this girl, this female snake in the grass, intends deliberately to ruin me?"

"She'll be the making of you, major," said Hebe calmly.

"And I wouldn't call people snakes and things," put in Sandra. "It doesn't sound well coming from you, and besides, you're not out of the woods yet."

"I wish to heaven I was back in them," fervently replied the much beset man.

Now the judge was regarding Mr. Lamb with amused

interest. Mr. Lamb was aware that the judge was not alone in his scrutiny. Mrs. Lamb at her lawyer's table alone refused to look upon her husband. She was artistically dressed for the occasion. Her lawyer was addressing the court.

"Your honor," he said a little self-consciously because of the ridiculous nature of the charges he had to press, "I shall prove that my client's husband not only turned into a horse, a seagull, a kangaroo, a goldfish, a dog, a cat, in order named, but also that he actually had the temerity to assume the form of a lion—a dangerous and destructive animal."

The judge's smile of amusement deepened.

"Sounds like a lot of bedtime stories to me," he observed. "Why don't you establish adultery and call it a day?"

"My client insists on justice," replied the lawyer. "We have made no charge in our brief that we are not able to prove."

"If she insists on proving all her charges this case will become a permanent institution I'm afraid," said the judge. "Hurry on with the animal business, and don't make me feel too silly. I'm a serious-minded man in spite of the things to which I occasionally have to listen."

To Mr. Lamb's horror and surprise his daughter was asked if she would voluntarily take the stand. In his desperation he clung to her skirt as the young lady rose eagerly to go to the chair.

"Steady, major," she whispered, "or you'll be having your daughter testifying in the flimsiest excuse for a breech-clout."

Mr. Lamb released her, and the girl swinging herself into the chair sat smiling innocently upon the judge, after she had taken an oath she had no intention of keeping. The lawyer for Mrs. Lamb addressed her.

"Miss Lamb," he asked with the utmost politeness, "what did you first think when you discovered a horse in your father's bed?"

"Why I naturally drew the conclusion that Sapho had invited him in," she replied with compelling candor.

The judge coughed discreetly behind his hand and looked at the astounded lawyer with eyebrows slightly elevated. The lawyer was in a state of painful confusion. He would willingly

have asked the witness to step down, but was afraid of the impression such a move would make. Mrs. Lamb had half arisen in her chair and was staring at her daughter with murder in her eyes.

"I'm a little astray," remarked the judge. "You mentioned someone by the name of Sapho. I thought your mother's name was Tilly, Miss Lamb?"

"It really is Mary," Hebe explained with painstaking patience, "but mother never liked that name. So father always called her Tilly. She thought Tilly wasn't romantic enough, so to humor her whim I called her Sapho because she was always play-acting in father's best pajamas, and lying on the floor with—"

The hands of the plaintiff's lawyer were churning wildly about in the air. His client sat white and trembling at her table. Behind her she could hear the sound of suppressed laughter.

"I protest," the lawyer spluttered. "The witness is introducing a lot of irrelevant evidence. Whether Mrs. Lamb's pajamas—"

"They weren't Mrs. Lamb's pajamas," broke in Hebe. "I distinctly told you she sneaked them on my father."

Then the lawyer lost all control.

"Why quibble about it?" he demanded furiously of Hebe. "What earthly difference does it make whether the pajamas belong to your father or your mother?"

"All the difference in the world," replied Hebe, looking pityingly upon the lawyer. "You see, a woman's pajamas are built according to an altogether different method of construction than a man's. For one thing a woman's pajamas—"

Laughter in the courtroom was now quite general, and, so far as the judge was concerned, uninterrupted.

"Your honor," said Mr. Wilson with a hopeless droop to his shoulders, "if I hear any more about those pajamas I'll have to withdraw from the case."

"Very well," replied the judge agreeably. "Let's talk about something else."

Mr. Wilson revived a little and turned once more to the

willing and anxious Hebe. For a certain reason he wanted to establish a date.

"Miss Lamb," he asked, "please answer this question as briefly as possible: after the appearance of the horse do you remember the exact date when you next found your father in bed?"

"On the morning of the twenty-fourth," the young girl answered without a moment's hesitation. "I remember because Leonard Gray was visiting mother over the week-end, and although she didn't know that I knew it and—"

"You may step down, Miss Lamb," interrupted the lawyer in a dead voice, "unless the defense wishes to question you."

The defense did.

"Miss Lamb," asked the legal representative of Hebe's father, "you can't possibly think of any reason for the viciously conceived rumor of some innocent intimacy existing between your father and the woman, Sandra Rush?"

"Hold on," exclaimed the judge momentarily interrupting work on a picture he was drawing. "I never heard such a perniciously worded question in all my born days. Ask it all over again, Mr. Hedges, and this time don't try to be so subtly leading, or rather, misleading."

"Gladly, your honor," said Mr. Hedges smoothly. "Miss Lamb, there is of course no foundation in fact in the childish gossip that your father and Miss Rush were ever anything more than nodding acquaintances—almost hostile?"

"Hold on again," interrupted the judge. "You might be trying to spare our feelings, Mr. Hedges, but you're not improving a bit. I'm afraid you'll have to ask that question as if you desired information rather than confirmation."

"All right," said Mr. Hedges with ill humor. "Did this Rush woman and your father ever misconduct themselves?"

"Jointly or individually?" asked the literal-minded Hebe.

"Jointly," replied the lawyer. "In each other's company and at the same time and place."

"Well, I wouldn't be surprised," the girl admitted. "Now that you've made yourself clear I'll have to say that I wouldn't be a bit surprised. Not before me, of course, but my father is only

human and the Rush woman is so *laissez-faire*. Then again, mother was always so busy. Can't sit up all night and twirl your thumbs, you know."

"She can step down so far as I'm concerned," said Mr. Hedges, turning his back on the young lady.

The judge removed a handkerchief from his face and looked at Hebe with brimming eyes.

"They don't seem to want to play with you any more, Miss Lamb," he told her. "You may step down with the satisfaction of knowing that you have been perfectly disastrous to both sides."

Hebe was popular with neither Mrs. nor Mr. Lamb when she returned to her chair beside the latter.

"What did you want to go and tell lies for?" her father demanded, his whispered words laden with indignation.

"Wasn't telling lies," replied Hebe. "How do I know what you and Sandy do with your spare time? I didn't say you did and I didn't say you didn't."

"No," muttered Mr. Lamb sarcastically. "You did everything but draw a diagram. And why did you call her that Rush woman?"

"Sounded more desperate," said Hebe. "Anyway, Sandy told me not to spare her feelings. She wanted to shoulder half the blame for everything."

Mr. Lamb choked down his wrath. He would have preferred to choke his imp of a daughter. He turned his eyes on the next witness and started. The witness was the man who had bought him at the horse show.

"Mr. Rudd," the opposing lawyer was asking, "did you purchase a horse at a horse show on the twenty-fourth of last month?"

"I thought I did at the time," replied Mr. Rudd.

"Did you notice anything peculiar about the horse when you purchased him?" continued the lawyer.

"I did, sir," said the witness. "That horse was drunk, dead-drunk and snoring."

"And where is that horse now, Mr. Rudd?"

Mr. Rudd looked long and searchingly at Mr. Lamb, while

that gentleman returned the look with an ironical eye. Then the farmer pointed an earthy-looking finger at him.

"Wouldn't be surprised if he wasn't the horse I bought," said Mr. Rudd.

At this the judge slapped his leg and leaned over his desk.

"Pardon me," he remarked, "but did I understand you to say the horse was dead-drunk?"

"He was, your honor."

"And how about yourself, Mr. Rudd?"

"Sober as a judge, your honor."

"Thanks for the compliment, Mr. Rudd, but do you mean to tell me you didn't know the difference between that gentleman and a horse?"

"Well, I found him between the shafts, your honor, and the thing I'd bought for a horse had clean disappeared. Ain't never seen it since."

Mr. Wilson intervened at this point.

"How did the gentleman explain his presence between the shafts of your cart, Mr. Rudd?" the lawyer asked.

"Said he was playing horse," replied Mr. Rudd. "Told me a long cock-and-bull story about how he couldn't break himself of the habit of playing horse."

Mr. Wilson laughed scornfully and turned to the judge.

"You can see for yourself, your honor," he said, "what a lame excuse that was under the circumstances."

"There's nothing wrong under the law in playing horse," observed the judge mildly. "It's rather an odd sort of amusement for a great, tall man like Mr. Lamb. Still if he wants to ride a broom or even to pull a cart he has a perfect right to do so."

He paused for a moment and looked curiously at Mr. Wilson. "Do you actually believe in this man's story?" asked the judge.

"Certainly, your honor," Mr. Wilson replied. "The witness is on his oath."

"I know all about that," replied the judge impatiently. "I'm not suggesting perjury, but I've known men who would have taken an oath that they were seeing snakes and pink ele-

phants and green devils that existed only in their feverish imaginations. The judge that Mr. Rudd said he was as sober as, must have been a judge of whisky. That's the only way to justify his obviously impossible statements. Now, Mr. Wilson, let's get down to cases. If you can't prove that the defendant was a horse, you're going to have a great deal harder time trying to prove that he was a goldfish or a lion. And so far as I'm concerned it's going to be practically impossible for you to convince me that that gentleman sitting there with his sweet, innocent young daughter was ever a kangaroo. This is the silliest divorce case so far that I've ever tried. It has its amusing side, but I'm not here to be amused. Why don't you drop all this animal business and press a charge that you can get your teeth into—something more homelike and understandable—adultery for instance?"

"One moment, your honor," said Mr. Wilson hastily. "Listen to this."

The lawyer drew near the rail and spoke in a low voice to the judge. Both of them looked with interest at Mr. Lamb, who under the combined gaze of the two legal minds began to grow decidedly uncomfortable.

Suddenly the judge broke down and buried his face in his hands, his shoulders shook and strangling noises came from between his fingers. Presently he mopped his face with his handkerchief and fixed his tearful eyes on the lawyer.

"You're only guessing, Mr. Wilson," said the judge. "And besides you haven't even established the fact that he was a horse. You'll have to do better than that or I'll throw this case out of court."

Mr. Lamb's face was flaming. Strange things were going on inside him. If his wife had wished to humiliate him her wish was amply gratified. Through hot eyes he saw that Mr. Rudd's place in the witness box had been taken by the woman in charge of Sandra's underwear shop. His heart sank. Was that scene to be repeated for the benefit of the public? Mr. Lamb wanted very badly to be somewhere else. He would glady have turned to a stone or to any other inanimate object

for a change. Madam was gorgeousy arrayed. She seemed to regard the occasion in the light of a pleasant diversion.

"It was an assault partial," she was saying in answer to some question the opposing lawyer had put to her. "Not an assault complete. A moment more and it might have been utter."

"How was the victim of this brutal attack clad?" continued Mr. Wilson.

"The assaulted one was clad in a costume most revealing," explained madam. "An irresistible creation of my own. Should you remove all of your outer garments, m'sieur, and cut the little that remained into ribbons, retaining only the smallest possible protection, you would arrive at something of the same effect."

"Don't try it, Mr. Wilson," put in the judge. "I've stood about enough for one day."

"What was Mr. Lamb doing?" continued Mr. Wilson, striving to maintain his dignity in the face of the quietly mirthful courtroom.

Madam seemed completely surprised by this question. She elevated her shoulders eloquently and seemed to be taking the courtroom into her confidence.

"Why, m'sieur," she protested. "What would you do? What would the judge do? What would any man do under the circumstances?"

"I hate the way that woman talks," observed the judge. "The situation is sufficiently clear, don't you think, Mr. Wilson?"

But madam was well launched on her description and would not be denied. "When I reëntered the room—"

At this point the human elements contained in Mr. Lamb seemed to crash and to fall into disorder. The little russet man had at last surpassed all his previous efforts. Either out of pity for Mr. Lamb or through some caprice of his own, he had changed him into what might be roughly termed, a combination animal. Lamb had the feathered head of a large rooster, the body of some strangely designed prehistoric animal and the tail of a lizard. Not knowing what a sight he presented, he was able to gain some slight conception from the fact that even his own daughter shrank from him. The opposing lawyers leaped

the rail at the same instant and took refuge with the judge behind his desk. Their bulging eyes slanted across its surface as if the three gentlemen were being strangled. Mrs. Lamb appeared to have swooned. The courtroom was in an uproar. With a strange, whistling gasp Mr. Lamb looked uneasily about him, then turned and shuffled awkwardly down the aisle. No one raised a finger to stay his progress.

"I take everything back," said the judge when order had been restored. "It seems I was all wrong. Do you know what that thing was, Mr. Wilson?"

"I doubt if anyone does," replied the gentleman.

"Well, whatever it was," continued the judge, "I'm sure your client cannot be expected to live with it. I wouldn't do so myself for the world. The papers will be drawn up immediately. This court is officially adjourned, but those who care to remain until they have collected their scattered wits are at liberty to do so."

With dignity befitting his exalted office, the judge gathered his robe about him and withdrew.

Chapter XXI. Exit the Little Russet Man

WHEN MR. LAMB CAUGHT SIGHT OF HIMSELF IN A STORE window he jumped three feet in the air so great was the shock he received. Once more the strange, whistling sound came from between his beak as he hopped and shuffled along the street. More than ever now he felt cut off from humanity. Even the automobiles seemed to shrink from him. What would Sandra think of him? Would she, too, be revolted like Hebe? He was going to find out.

Sandra, having withdrawn from the swollen ranks of the employed, was sitting on her front veranda. No one else seemed to be in sight as Mr. Lamb hopped up the steps and squatted down beside her. He was breathing wheezily from exertion—wheezing and whistling distractedly. His lonely, frightened eyes peered questioningly into Sandra's, then he looked away

as if ashamed to meet her gaze. Now that he was there he wished he had not come.

"Sit down and rest," said Sandra quietly. "Don't you think you're laying it on a little strong? I stood you as a lion and a kangaroo without turning a hair. When you were a seagull and a goldfish I did what little I could to protect your interests. When you were a cat I actually took you to bed with me. Not satisfied with your past achievements it now seems that you've begun to make up animals, combining them, trying to be three animals at once. It's a trifle more than a potential wife or mistress can stand. I think it's very silly to make up animals. Have you seen yourself yet? Look."

She took a small mirror from her vanity case and held it up before Mr. Lamb. With a strangled, gasping squawk he flopped down the steps and shuffled away as fast as his queer, ill-fashioned legs could carry him. A thin film seemed to have settled over his eyes. He could see only dimly. He was totally unfitted for the world in which he found himself. His heart was heavy, however, with human despair.

Sandra rose quickly from her chair and looked after the retreating animal. Once she called to him, but Mr. Lamb did not appear to have heard her. Filled with misgiving for the safety of this defenseless creature she hurried to Mr. Lamb's home, but he was not there. Hebe greeted her at the door and gave her an account of what had taken place at court, after which they sat down and wondered what had become of Mr. Lamb.

The subject of their speculations knew neither what to do or where to go. News of a strange animal being at large spread rapidly through the countryside. Parties were organized to capture or to kill this animal. Big, quick-tempered, hard-biting dogs were pressed into service. The animal was different, therefore it did not belong. It was the invariable attitude of humanity—destroy what you cannot understand. Mr. Lamb became a hunted thing.

His trail was picked up on the outskirts of the town. Soon he heard the hue and cry behind him. Sheer panic weakened his efforts as he hopped laboriously along. He was about to enter

a wood when he spied a small hut before which a man was sitting, a man with vague, troubled eyes and a head of matted hair. Mr. Lamb recognized the man. He was the local half-wit, almost as far removed from his fellow men as was Mr. Lamb himself.

When the half-wit saw the winded and hard-pressed creature he showed neither surprise nor alarm. He rose from the ground and approaching Mr. Lamb, looked sympathetically into his dim eyes. "Tired," he said as if to himself, "and thirsty. Scared near to death."

The sound of pursuit was growing steadily nearer. Three dogs, nose to the ground, were streaming across the field. Behind them came the rabble of the town. The half-wit frowned and looked at Mr. Lamb.

"They're after you," he said quietly. "They've been after me for years. Come along."

Mr. Lamb hopped after him to the hut and drank thirstily when the man gave him a cup of water. Then the man went out and stood before the door. In his hand was a heavy stick.

Within a few minutes Mr. Lamb heard the voices of his pursuers and the snarls of the dogs. The house was surrounded and shouts rang out.

"Leave the poor creature alone," he heard the half-wit saying. "He's not hurting anybody, and I won't let you at him."

The dogs were urged forward, and the crowd fell upon the struggling half-wit. In spite of his terror Mr. Lamb tried to come to his aid.

"There it is!" a voice shouted. "Get him."

A large rock crashed against the side of Mr. Lamb's head and the strange animal sank down, a crumpled, uncouth mass. A dog worried his tail, and by his side the half-wit was feebly trying to rise. Through bruised lips he was muttering something about the crucifixion of Christ. The crowd stood over the still animal with a feeling of great accomplishment, particularly the man who had thrown the rock.

When Mr. Lamb regained consciousness he was lying on a large marble slab. A group of near-sighted-looking gentlemen were examining him minutely. One of these gentlemen was

clad in white. In his hand was a long, thin, and extremely businesslike knife. Mr. Lamb sat up abruptly and looked about him. The room in which he found himself was rigged out as a laboratory. To Mr. Lamb it had the appearance of a torture chamber. The men seemingly were highly excited. They were staring at Mr. Lamb with deep interest.

"Oh, I say," said one of them in remonstrating tones, "that was really too bad of you."

"How too bad?" asked Mr. Lamb, a trifle giddily.

"Well," continued the man, "a moment ago you were a most remarkable type of animal. Now you're only rather a commonplace sort of person."

"You're not so exceptional yourself," replied Mr. Lamb, irritated by the man's manner.

He swung round on the table and addressed another member of the group.

"I wish you would remove the knife from that unreliable-looking individual's hand," he said. "What are all of you trying to do anyway, murder me?"

"No," replied the other. "This is a meeting of scientists. We were just going to find out what manner of animal you were. You seemed to be quite dead."

"Well, I don't seem quite dead now," said Mr. Lamb. "And I'm not an animal. You'll have to stick that knife into someone else, I'm afraid. I want to go home. My head hurts."

"But aren't you going to be that way any more?" one of the men protested.

"Come, come," urged one. "Snap back for us, won't you?"

"All I can say," remarked a third, "is that as you were, you were a great gain to science and that as you are, you are not much of a contribution to the human race."

"Won't you even try?" pleaded a bearded individual. "Come now, make an honest effort. Try hard. Be an animal."

"Yes," urged still another member of the group. "Pull yourself together."

"And you'll pull me apart," replied Mr. Lamb.

"I'd like to cut him open anyway," remarked the man with

the knife. "There must be something strange inside him. No one would ever know."

Mr. Lamb slid hastily from the marble slab.

"Everyone would know," he announced. "If you come a step nearer with that horrid-looking knife, I'll let out a yell that will bring in the entire neighborhood, you cold-blooded, long-faced murderer. You look like a horse yourself. Why don't you slit your own hide open?"

Mr. Lamb felt better after this little outburst. He walked to the door with a dignified step, then turned and faced the bewildered and disappointed scientists.

"The next time I turn into an animal," he announced, "I'm going to call in an osteopath."

It was quite late when Mr. Lamb reached home. The house seemed empty. He went directly to his study, and without troubling to switch on the light sat down in his usual chair. He wanted to rest his eyes to see if the pain would not leave his head. Through the doors to his little porch the starlight shone into the room. Presently Mr. Lamb became aware of the fact that a small red light was glowing steadily opposite him. He caught the aroma of cigar smoke.

"Are you satisfied?" came a voice through the darkness.

Mr. Lamb recognized the voice, and his heart began to beat a little more hopefully. He got up and switching on the light, stood looking down at the little russet man. That cheery individual was sitting exactly as Mr. Lamb had last seen him. In one hand he held a half-smoked cigar, in the other a half-consumed highball. His umbrella was neatly arranged on the floor at his side.

"I hope you are," replied Mr. Lamb. "I'm fed up. You've ruined everything for me including the zoo."

The little russet man smiled.

"Well, Mr. Lamb," he said, "you're all through now. It's done you a world of good. Respectability almost had you. You could never have stood the strain."

"I'm not respectable now, God knows," said Mr. Lamb. "I'm the most talked about person in the nation. I'm divorced, disgraced, and forever marked as a freak of nature."

"Do you regret your experiences?" asked the little russet man.

Mr. Lamb thought over the past few months and grinned.

"No," he replied. "Not exactly."

"The world has a short memory," his visitor resumed. "And anyway, you should travel for a while. See something new, Mr. Lamb. As an animal you seem to have a faculty for getting yourself into trouble. As a man your life should not prove to be so devoid of interest. The best side of you is your bad side —bad, I mean, from the point of view of Mrs. Grundy and her friends. Develop that side. Drink, eat, love, and laugh to your heart's content. Don't worry about people who peer through windows. Don't hurt others, but don't let others hurt you. They'll do it every time if they can get you on the run. The world envies successfully unmoral people. Also it hates them. What your generation refers to as a hangover is not necessarily a mark of shame. There's plenty of room in the world for a decent-spirited drunkard. Sobriety is good for certain persons only. You are not one of them. And, by the way, if I were in your place I'd look up that half-witted chap who tried to help you out. I find him one of the most likable characters in the community."

Mr. Lamb walked over to a table and picked up the decanter. He was considering the words of his guest. A breeze passed through the room, and Mr. Lamb, turning, saw that the doors to his porch were open. Evidently the little russet man had passed through them, because he was no longer present. Only his umbrella remained beside his empty chair, and as Mr. Lamb stood looking at it the umbrella rose from the floor and moved slowly across the room.

"Almost forgot it that time," from nowhere in particular came the voice of the mysterious little fellow.

Mr. Lamb walked out on his porch and sat down. A small hand slipped through the darkness and came to rest on his. Mr. Lamb sprang up with a smothered cry of fear.

"For God's sake," he complained, "why is everybody creeping up on me in the dark? I'm as nervous as a bug."

"We'll have to do something about that," said Sandra. "Sit down and keep your shirt on."

Chapter XXII. In the Wake

SANDRA AND MR. LAMB WERE TOO MUCH IN THE PUBLIC EYE to get married, so they agreed to play make-believe. However Mr. Lamb had extracted a promise from Sandra in the presence of Hebe and Melville Long to make him an honest man the moment they reached Paris.

Mr. Lamb had readily consented to go abroad for an indefinite period.

"If I stay here," he had remarked at the breakfast table, where the suggestion had first been advanced by Sandra, "all my friends will be sitting around expecting me to turn into something for them. As far as business is concerned, I'm pow. A man who harbors the horrid fear that at any moment I may become a centipede or a panther is hardly in a receptive frame of mind to concentrate on a list of securities. Billings will have to carry on at the office, and Thomas will stand by the goods here at home."

"I might run over with a contingent of Boy Scouts myself," announced Brother Dug. "You'll know when we get there because we'll all be singing."

"Tell us where you're not going to be," said Hebe, "and we'll go there."

Douglas grinned amiably.

Hebe and Mr. Long were married. During the last ten days he had proved himself useful in procuring the wrong tickets for the right boat or the right tickets for the wrong boat. The efficient Hebe had at last been forced to assume the responsibility of getting the party started. Mr. Long senior had been so pleased at the prospect of getting his son out of the house for some time to come that he had disgorged great quantities of money.

"I hope that at least you'll be able to prove yourself a

father," the old gentleman had said upon relinquishing the check.

The three young people were now pushing Mr. Lamb up the gangplank. To outwit the newspaper reporters he was wearing a false beard above which his eyes peered out guiltily at the world. Unfortunately the beard fell off half-way up the gangplank. He quickly slipped it into his pocket, leaving part of it sticking out.

"I thought you were wearing a beard, sir," observed his steward when he had placed the luggage in the stateroom.

"No," explained Mr. Lamb. "That was someone seeing me off."

When the steward was about to leave Mr. Long appeared wearing the beard and solemnly shook hands with his father-in-law. The steward departed baffled. Needless to say the party had been well primed for the occasion.

On the table in the Lamb suite reposed a bowl of animal crackers and a large Noah's Ark.

"Don't forget to sing," ran the accompanying note from Brother Dug. "Love and kisses."

The ship was now well under weigh. Several miles up the river two odd-looking characters were emerging from the pier shed—ancient Thomas and the vague-eyed half-wit, both of whom were already missing Mr. Lamb. That gentleman and Sandra were standing in the stern. Sandra was getting very close to him. They were both looking back at the wake of the ship. It was the same ship on which Mr. Lamb had once been such a disturbing stowaway. Sandra continued to cram herself against her companion. Mr. Lamb gave her a pinch of protest.

"Don't hurl yourself at me like that," he complained, looking nervously about him. "You're practically sitting on my chest. I'm not an open subway door."

Apparently Sandra did not hear him. She wedged herself even closer. Suddenly Mr. Lamb pointed to a weather-beaten old seagull raucously following the ship.

"See that old devil?" said Mr. Lamb. "Well, I think I know that gull. He asked me to eat fertilizer with him once."

"Do you happen to know who's aboard this ship?" asked Hebe, brightly, suddenly appearing at the rail.

"I hope not," replied her father. "Who?"

"Sapho and Leonard Gray," announced Hebe.

Mr. Lamb stood as if contemplating a rapid descent into the sea. Sandra seemed highly delighted by the news.

"Married or not?" she asked.

"Not," said Hebe briefly. "Leonard doesn't know the meaning of the word."

"A nice ship, this," observed Mr. Lamb.

"Where do you get off?" demanded his daughter.

Mr. Lamb turned back to the rail and gazed along the trailing wake, where the old seagull and his mob were scurrying greedily among the waves. A suggestion of a grin was beginning to gather slowly at the corners of his lips.

"Well, two can play at that game," thought Mr. Lamb. "Or rather four . . . and a very amusing game it is."

Then he addressed himself to his daughter.

"Hebe," he said, "with your usual efficiency, will you discover if the bar is working yet?"

"Go on, Hebe," urged Sandra. "He's been sticking his head in and out of the smoking-room so often, the stewards think he's trying to play peek-a-boo with them."

And Hebe scuttled away on her edifying quest.

TURNABOUT

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Chapter I. Mr. Willows Removes His Socks

CLAD IN A FRAGILE BUT FROLICSOME NIGHTGOWN WHICH DISclosed some rather interesting feminine topography, Sally Willows sat on the edge of her bed and bent a pair of large brown eyes on her husband. This had been going on for some minutes—this cold dispassionate appraisal. At the present moment a growing sense of exasperation was robbing it a little of its chill. Warmth had crept into her eyes, making them even more beautiful and effective, but still they were not pleasant. Far from it.

As yet, however, Mrs. Sally Willows had denied herself the indulgence of speech. For this she is to be commended. It was a piece of self-discipline she seldom if ever inflicted on her tongue. She was waiting, waiting for that sock to come off, hoping against hope that the crisis would pass and the evening remain calm if dull.

Meanwhile she was content to sit there on the edge of her bed and silently consider her husband. At the moment she was considering him as she would have considered a mere thing, or some clumsily animated object that forever kept knocking about her private life and getting in the way. Terribly in the way.

Five years ago everything had been so different. Then she never would have looked at Tim Willows as she was looking at him now. In those early marital days this man creature had never been in her way, could never get in her way too much. Naturally. That had been before he had become a mere thing in her eyes. Also, that had been before her own personal experience, enhanced by the vicarious liaison dished up by the high priests of Hollywood, had given her a true appreciation of men, had shown her how really attractive and devastating men could be and yet retain a quality so charmingly boyish and

unspoiled . . . great, silent, passionate men with whimsical eyes and just a shade of helplessness . . . men who could find a taxicab when no taxicabs were to be found and who could purchase first-night tickets or reserve an illimitable vista of rooms on the *Île de France*—never forgetting the flowers and a trick toy or two—with admirable precision and dispatch and without the slightest display of nerves. Whenever her own husband attempted similar operations on a much smaller scale, of course, he invariably returned unsuccessful, a nervous wreck bitterly complaining about the chicanery of mankind and the complexity of modern existence. Why, the poor beast could hardly make change without becoming so helplessly entangled that he was forced to turn to her with trembling hands. Frequently she feared the man would begin to chatter instead of talk.

As she sat there on the edge of the bed, a trim, sleek, wholly desirable figure with a smartly tailored head of glossy black hair, Sally Willows could think of at least a couple of dozen men more appealing to her than her husband, more worthy of her favors. When she had married Tim Willows she had not sufficiently appreciated her own possibilities or the possibilities of others. Idly she wondered how it would feel to be kept by a gloriously wealthy man who would give her everything she wanted, including unlimited freedom to exercise her charms on other men perhaps a trifle younger. Like most women who permit themselves to think at all she felt at times that she had it in her to become something pretty good in the line of a demimonde, one in a position to pick and choose her votaries, even to command them. Nothing sordid, of course.

And at that moment, sitting on various beds in various parts of the world, innumerable wives were thus considering their wretched husbands and thinking the selfsame thoughts. Who can blame them?

Yes, things were a good deal different now from what they had been five years back. For some time past—ever since she had danced with Carl Bentley, in fact—she had come to regard her husband as being just an animal about the house, an animal of the lower order that had been thoughtlessly endowed

with the gift of speech and an annoying ability to reason rather trenchantly. It had to be fed at certain times, kept clean and profitably employed. In a way she was responsible, and it was all so very tiresome. Occasionally she still found this animal useful, extracted from it a certain amount of physical satisfaction. It brought home money and did things to the furnace. Sometimes it even made her laugh and feel unexpectedly tender. But romance—where was romance? Deep, vigorous, headlong passion—what had become of that? Had the cinema screens absorbed that precious commodity as blotting paper absorbs ink? And why did this animal fail to arouse in her that deliciously meretricious feeling that lent such zest to her flirtations with other men . . . with Carl Bentley, especially?

All of which goes to show that Sally Willows was in rather a bad way. The girl stood sadly in need of a friendly but invigorating kick in her spiritual step-ins. But who was going to confer this favor upon her? She was worth it. She really was, for fundamentally Sally Willows was a good sort. One of the best. And at twenty-eight even a modern woman still has a lot to live and learn as well as to forget.

Cheerfully unconscious of his wife's protracted scrutiny, entirely ignorant of her state of mind, Mr. Willows, his slender body plunged in a deep armchair, was dreamily engaged in removing his socks. That is not quite accurate. The man was not actually removing his socks, but rather working himself up gradually to such a pitch that he would be forced to take some decisive action about his socks, one way or the other. It was almost as if he entertained the mad hope that the socks, once having ascertained his purpose, would obligingly remove themselves. From the expression in his rather dim, dissipated-looking eyes one would have been led to believe that he was enmeshed in the web of some mystic ritual of transcendent loveliness.

After thirty-five years of hostilities the man was still at war with himself and the world in general. So many men are, and like Tim, not altogether without reason. He had not succeeded in getting himself anywhere in particular, and he rather more than half suspected he never would. Somehow he could not bring himself to care greatly about it. That is bad, the very

antithesis of the red-blooded, two-fisted, he-man attitude that invariably leads to success. He was too erratic ever to establish himself securely in the advertising agency that tolerated his presence. Also, he was far too brilliant. Brilliance in business as distinguished from cleverness is a disturbing factor. It is slightly immoral and always subject to change.

Underpaid although frequently patted on the back, he was nevertheless held suspect by the powers that were. An accusing aura of cynical detachment seemed to surround him. He was unable to shake it off, unable to conceal it. From somewhere within his being emanated a spirit of unorthodoxy. At times in his presence his superiors experienced a vague feeling of insecurity and for the moment even suspected the efficacy of their most dependable platitudes. Even while they were showering praise upon him for some brain wave they seemed to realize that in Tim Willows they did not have a willing worker for whom the honor and the glory of the Nationwide Advertising Agency, Inc., trod hot upon the heels of God and country, so hot, in fact, that at times both God and country were left a trifle winded.

From his point of vantage on a nearby bookcase Mr. Ram, in his turn, considered both husband and wife.

Mr. Ram was a small Egyptian statue. Old, ages old. The wisdom of the powdered centuries lay behind his eyes. He was a colorful little figure and quite authentic. Mr. Ram through the sheer charm of his pursuasive personality had established himself as a household deity from the first days of the Willowses' joint experiment. He had moved with them from house to house, traveled with them over land and sea and shared in the ebb and flow of their never opulent fortunes. During those five years he had observed much and thought more. Whatever detractors might say about Mr. Ram they could not accuse him of having failed to take seriously his responsibilities to Tim and Sally.

Tim was more fortunate than he realized in possessing the casual affection of a globe-dinking uncle beside whom the blackest of sheep would have appeared pallid. Dick Willows, so far as the family had ever been able to ascertain, had only two

aims in life: to keep bartenders on the alert and to ward off the pangs of solitude from as many lonely ladies as time and nature would permit. Upon the occasion of his nephew's wedding this amorous philanthropist had from some corner of Egypt dispatched Mr. Ram to the young couple, together with an indelicate note in which he suggested that the little man be appointed chamberlain of the ceremonies of the nuptial couch, adding that Mr. Ram was that sort of little man and that his presence would banish the last shred of decency as was only right and proper at such a time.

From the first Tim and Sally had been drawn to Mr. Ram. He, on his part, was attached to them both, although of late their constant bickerings had worn a trifle on his fine Egyptian nerves. He was beginning to suspect that perhaps a little something should be done about it.

To-night as he considered the pair there was something inscrutable in his beady, black little eyes. Although time meant absolutely nothing to Mr. Ram he could not figure out for the life of him why Tim was consuming so much of it in the removal of his socks. They were not such remarkable socks. Just the opposite. They were the most infamous-looking socks, an unsightly hole disgracing each crumpled toe. And as he watched and waited on the bookcase a suggestion of gathering purpose touched the usually benign features of the colorful little idol. Most assuredly, something should be done.

Apparently Sally felt somewhat the same way about it. She fixed her bemused husband with an unadoring gaze and gave utterance to a single word which sounded strangely cold and hostile in the silence of the room.

"Well?" she said.

Across vague leagues of nebulous speculations Mr. Willows's eyes sought Sally's.

"Huh?" he inquired inelegantly. "You said what?"

"The sock," she went on in the level tones of one exerting the utmost self-restraint. "Does it come off?"

Slowly and uncomprehendingly, Tim's eyes journeyed down the long reaches of his thin leg until they rested broodingly on his sock. Gradually intelligence dawned.

"Oh," he exclaimed, a pleased expression animating his face. "It's the sock. How stupid of me, Sally. It comes off. In fact, I'm going to take it off myself."

"That's good of you," said Sally Willows. "I would."

And he did.

He took the sock off, then sank back in the chair and regarded his liberated foot with an expression of mild surprise, as if trying to remember where he had last seen the thing. Then he indulged in a display of sheer animalism which his wife found exceedingly trying to bear. With a sigh of almost voluptuous contentment he deliberately wiggled his toes, some of which in the process gave tongue to a crackling sound.

"Don't," was all she said, slightly averting her gaze. "Please."

"What's that?" demanded Tim, who under the fascinating spell of his toes was rapidly receding into a vast expanse of fresh speculation.

"Don't wig——" Mrs. Willows began, then hesitated. "What you are doing," she continued with dignity, "is both revolting and extremely childish. Don't do it."

Tim Willows stilled his agitated toes and thoughtfully considered the surprising request.

"Can't see anything wrong in a man wiggling his toes a bit," he observed at last. "Good thing to do. Good for the toes . . . for the entire foot, for that matter. Why don't you wiggle yours? Exercise 'em."

"There's only one place where I'd like to exercise my toes," replied Sally.

Mr. Willows disregarded this ruthless ambition and pondered a moment more.

"You know," he offered in a confidential voice, "I'll bet that almost everyone wiggles his or her toes at one time or another. It's not nice to think of Keats or Shelley or Lord Byron doing it, but they must have done it. Even that sloppy movie hero of yours. I'll lay odds he wiggles his priceless toes."

"Perhaps he does," conceded Sally, "but he doesn't explode a bunch of writhing firecrackers virtually in his wife's face."

A smile slowly arranged itself on Tim's lips and became fixed in a grin.

"I'm different," he declared irritatingly. "Bigger than he is. I take you into my confidence."

"There are certain little intimacies which even after five years of married life might just as well remain unrevealed," replied Mrs. Tim. "I don't like toes and never have. Can't bear the thought of toes, much less the sight."

"But I didn't ask you to think of my toes," observed Tim, in one of those gently reasonable voices that drive wives mad. "I can jolly well think of my own ten toes."

"How can I help it when you're waving the horrid things before my eyes?" A tragic note had crept into Sally Willows's voice.

"Trouble with you," continued Tim reflectively, "is that you've got a phobia against toes. You allow them to dominate your mind. They get the best of you. Now, take these toes, for instance. Look at 'em."

"I won't take those toes," Sally protested passionately. "You take those toes and get them out of my sight. Cram them into your slippers. And, furthermore, I have no desire to get into a long, involved argument with you about toes or any other part of your miserable anatomy. Is there no fragrance in life? No romance? Must I be compelled to sit here all night with my thoughts no higher than your crablike toes?"

"Oh, all right. All right," Tim hastily agreed, realizing from past experience that the breaking point was dangerously close at hand. "We'll say no more about toes."

He snapped off his other sock, thrust his feet into his slippers, struggled out of the chair and strayed off nakedly about the room.

"I say, Sally, seen anything of that shirt?" he called out after he had succeeded in methodically disarranging the contents of the closet and knocking down several of his wife's dresses, which he gropingly retrieved and blindly flung back in the general direction of their hangers. "Wonder why women invariably hang up their things in such a hell of a way," he continued irritably. "No brains at all. Now where could that shirt have got itself to? Just where? Tell me that."

"I just saw you taking it off," replied Sally, ice edging her

words. "For goodness' sake cover your nakedness. You're unlike anything in heaven above or the earth beneath or the waters under the earth."

Mr. Willows allowed this remark to pass unchallenged, but stuck gamely to his aimless quest.

"I don't mean that shirt," he explained. "I mean that long voluminous garment I bought in Paris."

"When drunk," supplied his wife, then asked in a rather hopeless voice, "Aren't you ever going to use your pajamas, Tim—the bottoms as well as the tops? Is it essential to your happiness that you rig yourself up in these weird costumes and go trailing about the house like some anemic beach comber? Are you so physically different from all other adult males of your species that you must flaunt the lower half of your body in the eyes of the world?"

"I keep telling you," Tim retorted with weary patience, "that I can't stand pajama bottoms. It's like toes with you. And I don't know anything about other men. I don't go around investigating. Anyway, it doesn't matter. If the Lord Himself appeared before me at this very moment clad in a pair of pajama bottoms I could only find it in my heart to feel sorry for him. The damn things get in my way. They roggle up. They—they choke me."

"You needn't trouble yourself to make it any plainer," said Mrs. Willows with some attempt at dignity. "Don't give me a demonstration. Just the same, I'm sure other women's husbands must wear the trousers of their pajamas."

"Sure, a lot of lizzies," proclaimed Mr. Willows derisively. "Real men take their pajama trousers off when they go to bed."

"Don't be vulgar," said Mrs. Tim.

"Well, we won't go into that," he remarked, turning to a bureau drawer and pawing through its contents. "I'm different, as I told you before," he went on. "Much franker. I take you into my confidence—entirely."

"You're altogether too frank for decency."

He dragged several yards of material from the drawer and finally succeeded in draping it over his body. Above this tent-

like arrangement his face emerged with a triumphant expression. The remainder of him was far from lovely.

"I imagine the reason the French build their shirts like this," he observed, "is because they're constantly running in and out of doors with husbands and wives and entire hotel staffs running after them. It must be that."

"I'm not interested," returned Sally, "but I do know that that atrocity you're wearing is neither one thing nor the other. There's too much of it for a day shirt, and too little for a night. It's simply an unsatisfactory compromise."

"Well, at any rate," replied Tim thriftily, "I'm not letting it go to waste. I'm getting my money's worth out of it like any French gentleman would do."

"I'd even pay good money to have you take it off," said Sally.

"Oh, my dear!" her husband murmured, looking at her archly.

"Shut up," interrupted Sally. "You're not amusing. Is there no romance anywhere in that feeble frame of yours? Must I spend all my nights with a comic-strip character—a clown?"

Tom looked thoughtfully down at his wife.

"Romance, my child," he told her, "does not reside in the tail of a shirt. Its seat is here—in the heart."

He slapped himself so vigorously just below that organ that the front of his shirt gave a startled flip, and Mrs. Willows hastily closed her eyes. The effect of his little speech was somewhat marred.

"If I were you," remarked Mrs. Willows, "I wouldn't strive for nobility in that costume. It doesn't quite come off."

"Is that so?" he replied unenterprisingly, turning his back on his wife and running his eyes along a row of volumes in the bookcase. "What shall we read to-night?"

"I don't feel like reading anything to-night," Sally Willows replied petulantly. "That's all we do in this beastly place, anyway. It's read, read, read, night after night. No change. Nothing. First thing you know we'll be old. Life will be over. Other wives go places and do things——"

"Right!" shot back Mr. Willows. "They sure do."

"And I don't mean that either," Sally went on. "They are seen—not buried alive. What do I see? Where do I go? Cooped up here in this miserable house all day long. No companionship. No relaxation. Same old thing day in and day out, year after year. Then home you come, his lordship from the office. And what do you do? Do you offer me a couple of tickets to a play? Do you suggest going out to a dance or something? Ha ha! Not you. No. You go prancing round the house in a horrid old shirt like a third-rate comedian in a burlesque show. And then you ask me to read. Of all things, to read. Well, do you know, my darling husband, you haven't even taken me to one honest-to-God night club? Not one. When I married you——"

Tim Willows swung round to confront his wife, and the tails of his shirt flared alarmingly.

"If you made a phonograph record of that set lament of yours," he said nastily, "you could turn the damned thing on whenever you felt like it and save no end of breath. I know it myself by heart. Word for word, sentence for sentence it's graven on my brain. Now go on and tell me what I led you to expect before you married me—how I tricked you to the altar with false promises. Come to an hysterical climax about my unjustifiable jealousy and then we can both rush out into the night and offend the damn neighbors."

He turned bitterly away from the small, furious figure seated on the bed and, going to the window, stood there gazing out into the pinched face of winter. Hardly thirty feet away stood another neat little suburban home—with garden and garage—and in between lay nothing but dirty snow, its flat surface broken by a straggling line of frozen shrubs. Lifting his eyes a little he saw the roofs of other houses. There were thousands of them—too many of them. He felt himself sinking, going down in a sea of neat little suburban homes. In desperation he again elevated his eyes and let them rest on the dark outline of the distant hills. Bright stars were hanging above those hills. The stark limbs of numb trees reached achingly up to their cold beams. And lights studded the hills, the lights of other homes. 'Way off there people were living and carrying on life. Tim wondered idly what they were like, those

people who lived over there. Did they, too, commute? Did they go eternally to offices? Did they have to hang up their pride with their hats and coats and swallow rebellious words in the teeth of secure executives? Was economic necessity always goading them on, marshaling them down windy platforms, cramming them into subways that steamed and stank and finally plopping them down in front of dreary-looking desks, nervously baited and physically ruffled even before the long day had begun? Was life just going to be like that all the damn time? He had a dim understanding of his wife's restlessness of spirit. In a way he sympathized with her. Probably their glands were all wrong. They weren't real people. Not properly equipped for life. Maladjusted to the world. Tim did not know. Nor did he give a hang. Something was all wet somewhere. He, too, would like to try a night club, look at a lot of naked girls. It might be entertaining. Damned if he knew. He'd like to vary the monotony of the daily routine and talk with some interesting people—that is, if they would talk with him. Whom had he ever licked? Never done anything much. Only thought and talked . . . complained. But as things stood, what could he do about it? He was in no position to create his own circumstances . . . to pluck friends, funds, and entertainment from thin air. And anyway, what the hell was she grousing about? She was out all the day gallivanting round. She had freedom of action, thought, and speech. What was eating her? God knows, she was not repressed unless she created her own inhibitions through sheer intellectual vacuity. She had her day, her bridge, movies, shopping, teas, lunches, and even men. He was painfully aware of the latter. No, there was little about which she could complain. Perhaps he was wrong at that. What, after all, did he know about this woman? What did she know about herself? They were all in it together. A mess . . . a cul-de-sac.

Tim Willows, standing by the window, experienced a feeling of utter frustration. It was a spiritually debilitating feeling —a miserable thing. More profoundly hopeless than a nauseating hangover after a long-distance spree. More hopeless because now the brain was clear and could look into the future.

And what a future it was! Tim realized he had just about reached his highest peak. He wouldn't be earning much more money ever. Less, if anything. And he did not have much faith in breaks. People who waited for breaks, he had found, usually went broke. There she blew, the future, the taunting white whale. Constant bickerings and recriminations paved the way. And the rest—just sour grapes and shabby expedients. Well, it was a good thing they had no spawn, although a baby or two barging about the house might have given them a bit of a kick. At least they'd have something to think about beside themselves.

"There's going to be a change," came coldly from the bed. "I don't intend to stand this life any longer. Other women work. Why shouldn't I? If you won't make a life for me I'll make a life for myself. I deserve a life. I'm still under thirty and not altogether unattractive. All you seem to care about is reading and writing and bad gin."

At that moment she saw herself as the glorified secretary of a huge Wall Street wolf with a boyish smile. She was helping him to ruin thousands of inoffensive lives in one mad and dazzling coup. Then the Riviera and a series of top-notch seductions. Perhaps in the end she would discover that she had always loved her husband. But, of course, she'd have to do considerable experimenting before she found that out.

Tim's mirthless laugh smeared a streak across the pleasant picture.

"You've got a damn poor chance of finding life and romance on a desk top," he said. "And if you're satisfied with what you do find there you're a whole lot dumber than I thought you were, and that would make you a little less than a half-wit." He turned from the window and confronted the charming feminine figure which for him at the moment had lost a great deal of its charm. "What in the name of God are you kicking about, anyway?" he demanded. "You haven't a damn thing to do, no drudgery or monotonous routine. The Twills, such as they are, still take care of the house. You can pound your ear all day long or do what you jolly well please. No cooking, no washing—not even a child. I leave you here in the morning

literally drugged with sleep only to find you at night a nervous and physical wreck. Your first words are either a complaint or a criticism. And always in the offing is the threat of a nice, noisy case of hysterics. You hold that in reserve as a last resort because you've found out that it's an infallible weapon. You can win every time no matter how wrong you are, but nothing is ever changed, nothing is ever settled. You don't even drive me down to the station in the morning. At night you habitually arrive there late through some unavoidable delay. Your excuses are so illogical they fairly sicken me to hear them. I wish to several different sets of gods I could change places with you for a while. Believe me, I do. I'd jolly well find something to occupy my time without looking for work. I'd sit down and write myself a book. It might be a rotten book, but at least I'd have the satisfaction of finding it out. I know I could do it, and in your heart, when you use it, you know I could do it, too."

Strange to say, Sally did know he could do it. Even at that heated moment she realized that this husband of hers was a little better than she allowed herself to admit. There was a lot more to him than any of the men she knew. That was just the trouble. There was too much to him. He was not a normal male animal and he wouldn't act like one. He was a sort of artist without an art, which was much like being a man without a country. An unexpected wave of sympathy almost smothered the retort trembling on her lips. That would never do. They were often like this with each other now, their best words remaining unspoken while their worst ones came tumbling out.

"I'd like to take you up on that," she flung at him. "I wish I could change places with you. Oh, how I do! You clear out of it all every morning, go to the city and see something new—eat where you like and what you like—interesting men to talk to—good-looking girls to see—lots of them. And you don't miss one, I'll bet. You've got a rotten pair of eyes. You're like a little old lascivious hermit—a twittering dog."

"Why like a twittering dog?" Tim Willows inquired. "I don't quite get that. Twittering dogs and hermits don't seem to——"

But the course of Sally's words was not to be deflated by irrelevant questions.

"Don't worry, my darling," she continued. "I'd change places with you quick as a wink. At least, you do something, move about, create a little world of your own, travel places and stay overnight. I never stay anywhere overnight. No, here I am—chained down. A prisoner. All I need is a striped suit and a number."

Mr. Willows smiled fleetingly at this, then stood for a moment, looking seriously down at his wife.

"Sally," he said gently, "I think you must be mad or else you get a certain backhand satisfaction in being so consistently wrong-headed. You know damn well I don't enjoy the work I am doing, the mock importance and the hypocrisy of it, the daily drip I have to listen to and the humble pie I have to eat. A week of it would bore you to tears. Don't know how I've hung on so long myself. And I wouldn't have if I hadn't exploded occasionally. But I don't think I'll be able to hang on much longer. I feel a bust-up collecting itself right in the pit of my stomach. It's due almost any day now. Old man Gibber gets dottier all the time. He and his Nationwide——"

"Do all men complain——"

Sally's question was never finished. A knock sounding irritably on the bedroom door puts an end to further hostilities. As if overtaxed by this unreasonable formality, Mrs. Twill, as was her wont, opened the door just wide enough to permit the inthrust of her head. More than once Mrs. Twill had told her husband that it always made her feel foolish to knock on Mr. Tim's door, "him being hardly out of the cradle yet."

"You'll feel a whole lot foolisher some night if you don't knock," had been Twill's sage advice.

For as far back as Tim could remember, the Twills had worked in tandem for one or another member of his family.

"Would you like to have the Twills help you out for a while?" his grandmother would ask some visiting relation, and upon receiving an affirmative reply the Twills would be packed up and bundled off to another household. In this way they gained a more comprehensive knowledge of the Willows family

history and private affairs than was possessed by any single member. It had been an old family of old people. Most of them were now beyond the need of servants, but the Twills still went on tenaciously clinging to a world which for them was peopled mostly with memories. It was as if they had been granted a special dispensation by Time to keep on going until the last of the Willowses had stopped. Then their work on earth would be ended and they would be free to follow into another world the family they had so faithfully served, there to begin the whole thing over again under the divine auspices of a chatty, pro-Willows God. Although the Twills were rather more of an obligation than an asset, they were comforting to have about the house. Their chief interest in life centered round Sally and Tim. Sally's girth they constantly studied with patiently hopeful eyes, but so far no embryonic Willowses had rewarded their watchful waiting.

"I can't stop him," Judy Twill announced tragically.

"Whom do you want to stop?" demanded Sally.

"The old fool," continued Mrs. Twill. "I know he'll break his neck on those basement stairs. Will you call him up, Mr. Tim? The furnace is stone cold."

"The mother of that damned furnace must have been done in by an ice box," complained Tim as he made for the door, uttering loud and discouraging noises as he went.

"Do hurry," called Sally, all other considerations forgotten in her anxiety for the safety of the venerable but pig-headed Mr. Twill.

"Come out of that, Peter," shouted Tim down the back stairs. "Don't you dare put a foot in that basement."

Through the floor, hollowly, came the protesting voice of Twill:

"But I can fix it, Mr. Tim," it said.

"God, Himself, couldn't fix that furnace," replied Tim. "Don't you even breathe on the thing. Snap out of it, Peter, and go to bed. Get yourself a drink if you can find one."

There was no response to this, but certain noises in the kitchen assured Tim that Peter had changed his mind and found warmth for himself instead of the house.

"Yes, Miss Sally," Mrs. Twill was saying as Tim returned to the room. "I certainly agree with you. It's a shame and scandal he doesn't wear pants."

"I can stand to hear very little more of that," announced Tim, looking darkly at the two women. "What I do with the lower half of my anatomy is no one's business."

"Oh, is that so?" put in Sally, slightly elevating her eyebrows. "Well, I like that."

"How do you mean?" asked Mrs. Twill.

"Be still," snapped Tim. "I'm speaking of raiment now. If you mention those pajama trousers again I'll take them out of the drawer and cut them up into little bits. I'll burn the——"

"He was just like that as a baby," interrupted Mrs. Twill as calmly as if he had not been present. "No matter what we put on him at night you'd find him mother-naked in the morning —bare bottom and all."

"You can find him like that almost any time when he's not at the office," announced Sally. "But who wants to?"

"If you all have thoroughly finished," said Mr. Willows with frigid politeness, "I'll go down to the basement. Good-night, Judy. Tell that ancient wreck of yours that if he ever attempts to go down there again I'll put him on the retired list for good."

When Judy had withdrawn, Tim Willows looked down long and thoughtfully at his young wife.

"You know," he said at last, "my idea of hell is to be chained to a line of smugly secure home owners. Every one of them is stoking a glowing furnace and liking it. Every one but me. I am crouched on my bare knees, eternally doomed to pull cold clinkers from the sneering mouth of that damned thing down in the basement. That would be hell, and I'm already getting a sample of it right here on earth. In fact," he added as he walked to the door, "everything in this house is a little bit of hell."

"Then why not say 'To hell with everything in the house'?" inquired Sally, with one of her most disagreeable smiles.

"I do," replied Tim earnestly. "I most emphatically damn well do."

There was a pained expression in Mr. Ram's eyes as he

watched Tim Willows leave the room. High time that steps were taken to show these two mere mortals the error of their ways.

Chapter II. Interlude with a Furnace

WEDGED RATHER THAN CRAMMED INTO THE NARROW CONFINES of a packing case the great animal slumbered, sighing deeply in its sleep. It looked terribly uncomfortable, this creature, but was either unaware of the fact or ascetically disregarded it.

"With the entire house at his disposal," Tim wondered as he stood in the kitchen and looked down upon the dog, "why does he insist on pouring himself into that box? It's sheer stupidity—an inability to adapt himself to changing conditions."

Dopey was a large dog—too large, thought Tim Willows. Dopey would have made a better cow or even a small mule. The man's sense of irritation increased. Why, in God's name, why did this dog prefer the slow torture of that box to a pillow-strewn divan, a soft rug, or a comfortable corner in the front room?

Tim failed to realize that what little mind Dopey owned ran on a single track. He had always slept in that box; why should he not continue to sleep in that box? Night after night and even on dull afternoons, on fair days and foul, in sorrow and disgrace that box had been his refuge, his sanctuary. Other dogs no doubt were just waiting for an opportunity to take that box from him. This long had been Dopey's secret fear. But it would never be. That box was the one thing in the world that he actually owned. Growth, either physical or intellectual, meant little or nothing to Dopey. He brushed them aside as trifling considerations. He liked the smell of that box. It was familiar, homelike, and soothing to taut nerves.

When Tim had acquired this dog he had not been in search of a small dog. No. Neither had he wanted a large dog, a pounding, crashing, monolith of a beast. What Tim had been looking for was a nice, middle-size dog, and Dopey had ap-

peared about to fill the bill. As a pup he had given every indication that in the due course of time he would evolve into a conservative, moderately proportioned creature. At that time there had been no suggestion that the dog secretly entertained ambitions to become if not the largest of all animals at least the largest of all dogs. In short, Dopey had appeared to be just such a dog as Mr. Willows most desired, a creature whose size would conform with the specifications of a modest suburban home. But in this Mr. Willows had either been deliberately tricked by the seemingly guileless pup or else had mistaken his intentions. It is possible that Dopey for some time had been deliberately curbing his natural tendency to vastness until he had attained the security of a good home. Certain it is that immediately upon arriving at the Willowses' establishment the dog had abandoned all pretense of self-regulation and had started in growing dizzily before the alarmed eyes of his master. It is barely possible, on the other hand, that the thought of deception had never entered the dog's mind and that he was merely giving an outward manifestation of his appreciation of his great good fortune. It is just conceivable that Dopey said to himself, "This kind gentleman seems to have his heart set on owning a dog. Well, just to please him, I'll make as much of a dog of myself as I can manage. In me he will have more than just a dog. He'll have half a dozen dogs in one."

This might have been Dopey's attitude of mind, although his subsequent conduct makes it rather dubious. He speedily developed into a thief, a glutton, and a hypocrite, a nervous wreck in the face of attack, a braggart when danger was past. Had he been able to speak he would have lied steadily from morning to night, for the sheer sake of lying. He was a dog without a redeeming trait, without a spark of pride or an ounce of chivalry. Small dogs were his dish—that is, if they were small enough. In spite of which this animal had succeeded in worming his way into the good graces of Tim and Sally. Even the Twills tolerated him. On his part Dopey liked almost everybody who did not frighten him and who belonged to what he fondly believed to be the upper classes, but as almost

everyone frightened him Dopey had few friends. He was also a snob.

For this attitude there was no justification whatever. He was the lowest of low-bred dogs. It would have taken several commodious closets to accommodate his family skeletons. At first there had been some loose talk about his Airedale ancestry. There was nothing to it. At some time during the love life of his indefatigable mother things must have become terribly involved. The result was Dopey, a creature who could call almost any dog brother with a fair chance of being right nine times out of ten. He was a melting-pot of a dog, carrying in his veins so many different strains of canine blood that he was never able to decide what breed of dog he should try hardest to be, or to develop any consistent course of canine conduct. He had no philosophy, no traditions, no moral standards. Dopey was just dog. His mother might have seen an Airedale once or even made a tentative date with an Airedale, but after one good look at her son it was obvious that the date had never amounted to anything definite.

Dopey now lifted a long, tan, knobby head and gazed meltingly at his master, his moist nose quivering delicately. Heaving his great, angular bulk out of the box he stretched painfully, yawned, shook himself, then suddenly became possessed of the devil. After a crashing, three-lap turn about the kitchen he flung his moplike paws against Mr. Willows's chest in a whirlwind of hospitality.

"God Almighty!" protested Tim, ruefully regarding several parallel red welts running down his chest, "What's the meaning of all this? Down, damn you, down."

Now nothing, save perhaps an amorous woman when a man wants to sleep, can be more exasperating, more fiendishly tormenting than a dog that insists on being violently playful and affectionate when one's nerves are about to snap. It is then that one's mind morbidly conceives the idea that an evil spirit has entered into the dog for the purpose of driving one mad. Tim Willows's nerves were at their worst and Dopey was at his. The harassed man turned to the stairs leading down to the basement, cursed them bitterly from the depth of his heart, then

slowly descended while Dopey, in close attendance, licked the back of his neck with a tongue that felt like a recently used wash rag. He paused before the furnace and directed the stream of his profanity against its cold, bloated sides. Then he opened the door of the fire box and peered unhopefully into unresponsive blackness. Dopey went him one better and tried to crawl in. This resulted in a struggle between man and beast for the possession of the furnace. It ended in a draw. Tim pulled out the clinkers with one hand and pushed Dopey's inquiring face away with the other. This operation finished, Tim Willows sat down on a box and looked murderously at the dog.

"Blast you," muttered the man. "It's hard enough as it is without you making it harder. Why don't you go away somewhere and find something else to do, you great big ninny?"

He reached out to cuff the dog, but Dopey, his tongue lolling foolishly out, pranced just beyond reach and stood in an attitude of sportive attention. At that moment Tim thoroughly despised this dog with its silly face and ungainly paws. Rising wearily from the box he set about to collect some sticks of kindling wood, an action that sent Dopey into ecstasies of excitement. With wild eyes and teeth bared the dog snapped and lunged at the sticks, several of which he succeeded in snatching from his master's hands. Then strange noises were heard in the basement of that house. They issued from the distorted lips of Mr. Willows. That gentleman was chattering to himself with exasperation. He was in no fit condition to be allowed at large. Finally he picked up the dog bodily, staggered with him to the far end of the basement, dropped the perplexed creature, then rushing back to the furnace, seized some sticks and hurled them into the fire box. It had been an elaborate but successful maneuver. Mr. Willows was breathing heavily both from emotion and fatigue. Sweat ran down his face and cut paths across patches of soot and coal dust. His hands were the hands of a man who has toiled long in grimy places. At last he started a blaze, then once more seated himself on the box and thought up horrible tortures for Dopey. That stout fellow, nuzzle pressed to the floor, rump outrageously elevated, front

paws spraddled, was uttering deep-throated growls of mock ferocity.

"Shut up, you," said Mr. Willows, flinging a stick of kindling at the dog.

Dopey dodged adroitly, seized the stick in his powerful jaws and crushed it. Realizing he was entertaining rather than injuring the animal, Tim pretended to ignore it.

The business of putting coal on the fire proved even more trying. Every time the man attempted to swing the shovel the beast flung himself upon it, thus diverting its aim and spraying the floor with lumps of coal. This, thought Dopey, was the best game they had played so far. Mr. Willows made even more peculiar noises. He experienced a strong desire to break down completely and to abandon himself to waves of maniacal hysteria. Presently he took hold of himself and faced the situation squarely. He realized that nothing short of brutality would be effective in dealing with that dog. But at that moment Tim was too exhausted to employ such methods. Therefore he was forced to resort to subterfuge. It was an example of mind over matter.

Taking up the shovel he filled it with coal and placed it within easy reach. Then, squatting down, he lured the unsuspicious dog over to him. Suddenly he rose, delivered a kick of some force on the astounded rump of Dopey, seized the shovel and hurled its contents into the furnace before the dog had time to recover from his surprise and indignation. Mr. Willows was elated. He hurled insults at the baffled dog.

"Got you that time, you reptile," he grated, and then proceeded to tell the discomfited creature just what he was a son of. The information left Dopey cold. Nor did he appear to be any the worse from the punishment he had received. Not so Mr. Willows. That gentleman's right foot, encased in a soft slipper, was throbbing with acute pain. He hobbled to the box and sat down. Perhaps he had broken a toe, one of those toes against which Sally was so unreasonably prejudiced. Tim Willows felt the return of his former depression, which had been momentarily dispelled by his triumph over the dog. He realized now that it had been a hollow victory, Dopey's mental capacity

being what it was. Anyone with the merest suggestion of a brain could outwit that dog. And then there was the toe. Surely it had been one hell of an unpleasant evening. . . . Sally? That dear young thing was probably asleep by now. What a wife! Well, he would go up, grab off a consoling drink, and do a little reading. It was cold as the grave in that basement unless one kept moving. No place for a man clad only in a French shirt. Unconscious of the fact that he was still carrying the shovel, he made his way wearily up the steps, with Dopey panting hotly, but happily, on his heels. At the head of the stairs he stopped and looked down at the dog. In the presence of that great dumb beast words seemed inadequate.

"This is the end," he told the dog. "To-morrow you go. If I wasn't so tired now I'd cut you into tiny little bits. I'd make you sweat. Don't even look at me."

Dopey did not take the trouble to listen. He fawned upon his master and waited for something new to turn up. Why not make a night of it?

In a low, monotonous voice Tim continued to scold his dog as he passed through the box of a serving pantry and crossed the dining room. It was not until he had reached the portières separating this room from the lounge that he became aware he was an object of intense interest to five pairs of seemingly fascinated eyes. He looked up and to his disgust discovered that the room had been invaded by five persons, all of whom he disliked. At that moment their faces were registering a disconcerting blending of amusement and surprise. Tim stopped cursing and, with admirable presence of mind, reached out and drew the nearest portière to him. This he draped picturesquely over the lower half of his body. The remainder of him went unimproved. From a soot-streaked face his dim eyes peered out malevolently at the silent group facing him. Close by his side Dopey crouched and indulged in a few inhospitable growls. The dog was extremely nervous. It had all been so sudden. Sudden changes were unsettling. Dopey was frightened.

Then the rich, lazy voice of Carl Bentley made itself heard. It would. The man had a way of making his voice heard. Not that it ever said anything. It was just that sort of voice.

"Well," said Mr. Bentley, beaming down from a great height on a strangely diminished-looking Mr. Willows, "if it isn't Tiny Tim himself—Tiny Tim in all his glory."

Tim offered the group a wan smile, such a smile as might distort the lips of a man gamely but unsuccessfully fighting off an attack of sea sickness.

"Yes," he replied. "Yes, indeed. So it is."

Silence greeted this lame effort. The company continued to gaze. Mr. Willows began to grow a trifle uncomfortable. He hated being looked at as if he were some particularly noxious specimen of bug life.

"Indeed, yes," he continued, for lack of anything better to say. "Here I am. Been making a bit of a fire in the furnace." At this point he displayed the shovel as if to forestall any attempt at contradiction. "The other one went out," he added feebly. "There wasn't any fire at all."

Were these people either dumb or dead? Were they deliberately trying to upset him even more than he already was? The silence continued unbroken. The eyes continued to stare. Were parts of him sticking out, perhaps? He looked down at himself. Yes, lots of him was sticking out. Redraping himself furtively he essayed another smile and swallowed hard. How oppressive it was in that room . . . the silence and those eyes. Once more he sought cowardly refuge in the sound of his own voice.

"It was too bad," he went on, his thin words trailing away into infinity. "I mean about that fire. The first one. The one that went out." What the devil did he mean, anyway? Taking a fresh grip on himself he continued, "There should be a law about fires going out at this time of night." Here he laughed meaninglessly. "Ha ha! Not a bad idea, what?"

No one else laughed. Obviously the idea was not so good. The graven images remained unimpressed. They refrained from committing themselves either for or against it. Tim had feared as much. Then, suddenly, the spell was broken—snapped. Blake Watson had done it. Blake was the slave of a furnace of which he was inordinately proud. At the mention of the word "furnace" life always took on a new interest for him. He be-

came a changed man—changed for the worse. Snappily stroking his military mustache he glared at Tim severely.

"Can't understand that, Willows," he said accusingly.

"And that's not all you can't understand," Tim shot back. "Do you think I put the damned thing out on purpose just for the fun of making a new one?"

"Come, come!" admonished Mr. Watson. "Don't trifle. Now, I have a furnace and the fire never goes out. Does it, my dear?"

My dear, being his wife, Helen, an exhausted blonde with attractively bad eyes, languidly agreed with her husband in a voice that proclaimed she wished to God it would go out occasionally, thus relieving her of the unexciting company of the military mustache for a short time at least.

"You're a regular vestal virgin, Blake," Tim retorted. "And I don't intend to become one. No, not for any furnace."

"Good!" put in Helen briskly. "Don't become a vestal virgin. But tell us. What are you trying to become, Tim? From your attractive little costume I take it you've joined something pretty snappy."

"I'd like to take a look at that furnace of yours," cut in her husband in an executive voice he carried somewhere in the neighborhood of his boots.

"Go right ahead," said Tim. "Take a look at it, but I won't accompany you. If I see the miserable thing again I'll slit its throat from ear to ear."

"You know, old boy," Carl Bentley observed, still being his whimsical self, "we had no idea you were building a fire. You looked as if you'd just been picking lilies."

Nobody laughed much at this, and Bentley looked wistfully at the door leading to the hall. His stuff needed the right sort of audience, people who appreciated subtleness. Tim's voice recalled him to the room.

"No," he was saying quite seriously, "I really was building a fire. When I pick lilies it will be for a much more welcome occasion than this, but you won't be alive to enjoy it."

"Bur-r-r-r," muttered the irrepressible Bentley, turning up his coat collar and going through an elaborate pantomime of a shivering man. "That ought to hold me for a while."

Mr. Willows looked at him coldly, then turned to the others.

"And now," he continued, "if you don't mind I'd like to know how in hell you all got in here."

"Oh, we don't mind in the least," drawled Vera Hutchens. "We were barging by like a bunch of lost scows and we thought we'd just drop in. Make a night of it. Break out the flasks, boys."

"That was a no-good thought, Vera," observed Tim slowly. "In fact it was just too bad. And that little part about making a night of it is all wet. It's a washout. Don't trouble about taking off your things. If you want to make a night of it why don't you go out and build yourself a great, big snow man?"

"Oh, I say," complained Carl Bentley. "This is no go. We've just dropped in, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Tim, grinning, "and you can just drop out again. And I don't quite understand how you managed to drop in, to begin with. You must have damn well broken in. I locked the door myself."

"Wrong again," retorted Bentley in a gloating voice. "We were invited in most cordially."

"And who was so ill advised as to do a mad thing like that?" demanded Tim.

"Sally," trumped Bentley.

Tim was momentarily stunned.

"Where do you get off calling my wife Sally?" he got out. "So far as I know you've only met her twice in your life."

"You never can tell," insinuated Vera. "It's a small world, you know. Small and wicked, Tim."

Tim cast the speaker a mean look.

"Viper!" he said. "You'd be writing poison-pen letters if you knew how to write."

"Listen, Tim," chimed in Helen. "Don't be such a crab. We all live in the same town, don't we?"

"Unfortunately we do," snapped Tim. "Wish we didn't. If we all lived on the same street, I suppose, according to your way of thinking, we'd be entitled to sleep with each other as a sort of neighborly gesture?"

"Something like that," said Helen.

"How do you mean, something like that?" demanded Tim. "It must be that or nothing."

"Oh," replied Helen. "Is that the type of man you are? No half measures for you."

"You can see that for yourself, my dear," put in Vera. "Look how he's dressed. Always ready for something to turn up."

"Come, come!" exclaimed her husband, a thickset, well-dressed gentleman, solid, successful, and sly. Ted Hutchens felt that he had at least one valid claim on local immortality. He had played polo at the Westchester-Biltmore once and only once. "Come, come!" he repeated, as if rebuking a child, as he looked heavily at Tim Willows. The look and the admonition infuriated Tim.

"Go, go!" he shouted. "Everybody go. Get out. Beat it. Do you think I'm going to hide behind this curtain the whole damn night?"

"That was your own idea," drawled Vera. "For my part I think you looked sweeter in your simple little shift."

"Vera!" cried Mr. Hutchens.

"Sally!" exclaimed Carl Bentley. "At last."

"Why are your voices raised in unseemly dissent?" asked Sally with easy good nature as she came gracefully into the room. "Oh, I see. It's only Tim," she continued, looking curiously at her husband. "You do look brisk, dear. I thought you'd died in that basement ages ago."

Tim was bereft of words. He clutched at the curtain and stared at his wife. She was clad in a flaring pair of pajames and was wearing a short, silly-looking little jacket that did not seem to mean anything. He recalled having seen such outfits featured in newspaper advertisements.

"Sally!" he called in a hoarse voice. "Are you walking in your sleep? Look at yourself."

"What do you mean?" she retorted, sidling up close to the statuesque Mr. Bentley, who was looking at her with glowing eyes. "Why don't you look at yourself?"

"I mean those things you're wearing," said Tim. "They're not decent for public display. Go up immediately and put something on."

"Don't be dull, Tim," his wife replied. "These are hostess pajamas. They are supposed to be worn on informal occasions. Just such occasions as this—among friends."

"You're putting it mildly," replied Tim. "They don't encourage friendship. They invite ruin."

"Perhaps you're right," said Sally, smiling up slowly into Mr. Bentley's eyes. "I've a remote idea myself that one seldom sleeps in them."

Mr. Bentley favored his audience with a laugh not unlike a neigh, a significant sort of neigh.

"All right!" cried Tim, thoroughly aroused by this little exchange. "I can play, too." With this he stepped out from behind the portières and stood revealed to the company in his disheveled shirt. "This garment, ladies and gentlemen," he announced, turning slowly round with his arms extended, "is what is known as a host's slip-on. It may not look so good, but it's a damn sight franker and more practical than my wife's costume."

Taking advantage of the small panic created by his sudden unveiling, Tim limped to a nearby table, from which he snatched a hip flask and helped himself to a powerful drink, a gesture which gave to his shirt an amusing frontal elevation. Amid the appreciative giggles of the women and the subdued expostulations of the men he turned his back on the company and, with as much dignity as he could command, limped painfully from the room, the shovel still in his hand and Dopey at his heels. In the hall he placed the shovel in the cane rack, to the everlasting humiliation of several snooty walking sticks, then slowly mounted the stairs, his modesty becoming more assailable the higher he proceeded. Even the violent slamming of the bedroom door failed to shut off from his ears the pent-up frenzy of a jazz orchestra avalanching from the radio. For a moment he stood looking irresolutely at the door, then, opening it a little, he listened, Dopey doing likewise.

"Whoopee!" came the hearty voice of Carl Bentley. "Come on, gang. Let's go."

"I wish to God you would," muttered Mr. Willows. "You

big, inane bastard. Having a real nice time, aren't you? Seeing life in the suburbs. Wildfire! Aw, go to hell."

Once more he closed the door, this time quietly, and, hobbling over to a cabinet, took from it a glass and a bottle of whiskey. Thus equipped he sought a chair and sat staring vacantly at Dopey sprawled out at his feet.

"It's a good thing, stupid, you don't drink," he observed. "You're sufficient of a damn fool just as you are."

Dopey tried, but failed to understand. It didn't matter. Everything was all right. He was comfortable.

"Listen," continued his master, choking over his drink. "I've a good idea to get drunk and beat you up . . . within an inch of your useless life . . . to a pulp . . . a regular jelly."

The dog's snakelike tail thumped against the rug His master was being funny. He was such a nice man. Dopey felt himself moved to kiss him, but was too comfortable to make the effort. Some other time. Wearily his eyes closed. He sighed. Things always worked out for the best.

Tim Willows arranged himself another drink and sat listening to the radio. Gradually his feet began to tap time with the music. He had forgotten about his toe. Too bad he was such an indifferent dancer. He'd like to take a fling himself occasionally.

"Obsolete," he muttered gloomily. "Should be scrapped."

Mr. Ram looked thoughtfully down on man and beast. He felt that he would like to do a little something also about this dog. There was too much of it.

Chapter III. Good Clean Fun

IN THE LOUNGE BELOW, EVERYTHING WAS GETTING BETTER and better. That is, if noise counted. Something in the nature of a celebration in joint honor of modern and ancient days was in progress. It was rather a loose, heavy-handed affair, but those present seemed to enjoy it. Figuratively speaking, Diana was dancing improperly on the belly of a prostrate Volstead, while Bacchus poured gin in his eye. This interesting blending

of Dionysian and suburban rites was, as a matter of fact, nothing more nor less than a typical cocktail-necking party such as many find it necessary to attend in order to discover if sex still appeals. The Pagan and Christian eras endeavored to merge while still retaining the worst features of both. The result was an evening of nice clean fun. After all, what is a neck more or less, plus adjacent territory, among friends? Wives were not so much exchanged as released on short-term loans. This was the modern touch, the smart thing to do. The festivities over, these fair ladies would be returned to their husbands a little bit thumbed and dog-eared and more than a little drunk. It was one of those sportive occasions at which enmities are inevitably aroused and sordid recriminations incubated, for by the very nature of things there are few husbands and wives whose limits of conduct and powers of self-control register exactly the same. One or the other member of the tandem is sure to go too far. Then all hell pops.

Husbands and wives who intend to carry on together at all permanently should never attend the same cocktail-necking party unless one of them passes out and is unable to know what the other is doing. Otherwise it either cramps the style of both or furnishes the divorce courts with fresh customers.

Really, it's the devil and all to be modern—much too much of a strain. It involves, oddly enough, a swift return to a primitive state of arboreal promiscuity. Few people can follow this path with linked hands and light hearts. Each side is too heavily weighted with inhibitions and prejudices. Each side is vainly endeavoring to nibble the icing of the cake in order to retain the whole. The result is rather crummy.

Into Mrs. Tim Willows's party half a dozen fresh votaries had been introduced. They had been rung up and called in, and among them were a couple of unattached young women.

There is nothing like the presence of a couple of young women, unattached, among a number of not too old matrons to accelerate the tempo of a party. The young matrons were immediately put on their mettle when Joy Tucker and Agatha Green appeared. Then the married ladies started in to prove to the world that they had found in the matrimonial state a

great deal more than they had lost. As a corollary of this they naturally had more to give. On the other hand the virgins hinted of fair but difficult, although not impassable, territory still unexplored. This, of course, was a challenge to the adventurous. Altogether it was a stimulating and healthy form of competition from which the males as usual profited, adding thereby to their already overflowing reservoirs of complacency.

Naturally there was little conversation. Under the most favorable circumstances there would have been little conversation. These people were not so constituted. However, everybody talked a great deal and shouted even more. Risqué stories which were neither risqué enough nor funny enough occasioned sporadic gales of laughter. And through it all, above and around it all, piercing the smoke and perfume and the good old American tang of gin, the tireless-tongued radio lashed dancing couples into fresh paroxysms of activity.

It was just as well that Tim Willows remained alone in his room save for the companionship of Dopey and Mr. Ram. To begin with, at such parties he was not so good. He generally drank too much and observed too much, and the more he drank the more he observed, until at last he saw things that were not there at all. Then, again, his ideas of necking were disconcertedly crude. . . . He believed in treating a girl like a human being entitled to an intelligent exchange of ideas. Frequently women who had been gamely prepared to offer almost unlimited necking facilities were surprised to find that they had actually been talking for at least half an hour with Tim Willows, and enjoying it. This rather frightened them. They became a trifle subdued. Several stiff drinks of gin were required to bring them back to their former state of carefree animalism. On the other hand, there had been several occasions when only the intervention of Sally and several husbands had preventing him from dragging some woman upstairs and teaching her what for, as the English insist on having it. He steadfastly refused to remember these occasions, claiming that he had been too far gone in his cups to know what he was doing. Tim Willows was too simple and direct a person to be a successful modern. He belonged to a vanished era when

people talked and played and loved with effortless enjoyment.

For another reason it was just as well that Tim remained in his room. It was Carl Bentley's evening. By tacit consent the women of the company had left that gentleman to Sally. He was her man. Not even the young women attempted to horn in. Had they tried, their efforts would have proved fruitless. Carl Bentley was now hot on the scent. He had put in some of his best work on Sally and he had reason to believe that his campaign would soon be crowned by a complete capitulation. Sally was the pick of the lot, by far the most desirable woman in town, with no exceptions.

So Carl Bentley danced with Sally, drank with Sally and whispered suggestively in Sally's small pink ear. Above stairs Tim just drank and sought comfort in Kai Lung, than whom there is hardly a greater comforter, thanks to Ernest Bramah. When the unattached young women began to tap dance more with their abdomen than their toes, Bentley took advantage of the occasion. Everybody was present and accounted for, although neither clean nor sober.

"Sally," said Mr. Bentley in a voice almost as low as his intentions, "let's go out to the kitchen where there aren't so many people. You can't hear yourself think in here."

Sally looked indifferently round the room and carelessly moved off kitchenward. The blood was racing in her veins and her head felt delightfully dizzy and confused. Nothing much mattered except a good time . . . a little life. This man, Bentley, was so much more dominating and possessive than Tim. She liked that. Tim, in spite of his horrid ways, was rather too much of a gentleman. He made no parade of virility. He did not endeavor to master her. Sally decided he was not quite big enough. She preferred the size of Carl Bentley. He could smother her, and at the moment she felt like being smothered. It must be said for Sally that she was far, far from being herself. Modern gin is not a good thing for good girls, although it is awfully good for bad ones. Carl Bentley, well knowing this, followed her with a bottle.

What happened in the kitchen is nobody's business. It should be stated, though, that Tim Willows and his dog descended

into the small pandemonium of the lounge only a few minutes after the disappearance of Sally and Carl Bentley. He was just in time to witness Vera Hutchens slapping her husband in the face because that unfortunate gentleman had remonstrated with her for kissing the same man too long and too often.

"He always gets like this," she complained to the company at large. "Because he has a nasty mind he thinks everybody else is like him. Insults me, he does. Well, just to satisfy you, my dear,"—and here she laughed recklessly—"I'll kiss him as much as I like and you won't stop me."

This she proceeded to do. Throwing herself into the arms of a tall, quiet person who was extremely well heeled with grog, she satisfied herself and her husband as well as the man she was kissing. It did not matter so much to the man. He hardly knew whom he was kissing. He was just kissing some woman and so far that was all right.

"Suburbia at play," observed Tim in his quiet, sardonic voice. "Don't you girls and boys ever learn any new games?"

Tim was regarded with interest, particularly by several women in the room. He had managed to struggle into a pair of pajama trousers and was wearing a magnificent dressing gown. His feet were encased in a pair of comfortably padded slippers. He had done things to his hair and tidied himself up generally. Few persons if any realized how binged Tim Willows really was.

"Carry on," he continued pleasantly. "Some of you men who are able had better do something about Hutchens or we'll be having a murder on our hands."

This was nearly the truth. Hutchens, Vera, and the man of her choice were involved in an unseemly tussle. Vera was beginning to scream and cry, and the men were calling each other some pretty bad names. It was not a thing to see, yet at these parties it was always being seen.

Tim, whose dim but all-observing eyes had noted the absence of his wife and Carl Bentley, moved quietly toward the kitchen. Dopey, his ears flat against his head, followed fearfully. Quietly Tim passed through the pantry and opened the kitchen door. So engrossed was Bentley in his occupation that he failed to note the presence of an observer. Tim gazed thoughtfully at the

man's back for a moment, then, lifting Mrs. Twill's heavy rolling pin from the rack close at hand, he brought it down violently on Mr. Bentley's head. That misguided gentleman swayed gently on his feet, then crumpled to the floor.

"Sorry," said Tim, looking coldly at a white-faced Sally, "but really, you know, the kitchen is no place for this sort of thing. One doesn't play with fire here, one actually uses it. But, of course, you know nothing about that."

He rummaged about in a drawer and produced a long, sharp knife. With this he approached the prostrate figure.

"My God, Tim," breathed Sally as the room spun round and round her, "what are you going to do?"

Tim was cold white drunk and his words seemed to proceed from an ice box rather than from a man's chest.

"I'm going to cut his damn head clean off," he told his wife, "and throw it in the faces of your friends. That will teach them to behave themselves—fighting and screaming and semi-fornicating all over my house . . . what a way, what a way. Yes, off goes this one's head. Want to kiss it good-bye while it's still on?"

With a shuddering cry Sally dropped to her knees beside the still figure of Mr. Bentley. She placed a hand over his heart and looked up at her husband with a drawn face.

"Tim," she said at last, "you've killed him. His heart has stopped beating and he isn't breathing any more."

This information considerably sobered Tim. He walked over to the kitchen table and picked up a bottle of gin, from which he drank deeply. After this he passed it to Sally, who followed his example.

"Lock the door," he said, and seated himself on the table.

Sally obeyed and then seated herself beside her husband. Together they gazed down upon the victim of the rolling pin.

"He wasn't much of a guy," observed Tim, hoping thereby to comfort his wife.

"I know," replied Sally, "but if every guy that wasn't much was murdered there wouldn't be many guys left."

"I wouldn't mind that," said Tim. "What did you want to go messing round with him for?"

"He was all right," answered Sally. "Big and strong and passionate. You know how it is."

"Yes," said Tim rather gloomily. "I know how it was. Did you like him better than me?"

"No, not so much, but a girl gets that way on gin."

"Sally, these parties are rotten things. This should teach us a lesson." Tim looked at her seriously.

"Sure they are. I'm through with all of it," said Sally. "Everything."

"So is he—through for good, and so am I."

Sally passed him the bottle and Tim drank mechanically. So did Sally. Both of them by this time were quite too numbed to realize the seriousness of what had happened.

"Guess you're a murderer, Tim," said Sally at last.

"Sure I am," agreed Tim. "A confirmed murderer. What do you do in such cases? Telephone the police or just send for an undertaker and try to sneak him into a grave?"

"They'd be the last persons I'd telephone to," replied Sally. "Under the circumstances."

"Which are murder," added Tim with almost morbid enjoyment.

"Murder most foul," Sally managed to extract from some dim recess of her memory.

"He certainly does look murdered," reflected Tim. "Never saw a man look quite so dead. And just to think he was kissing hell out of you only a short time ago. By rights you should be stretched out beside him."

"If you're not more careful of what you're saying I'll turn you over to the police," replied his wife. "That would be a good joke on you."

"You've got a hot sense of humor. What are we going to do with his nibs?"

Sally took a sip from the bottle and considered this in silence. From the lounge came the clatter of the radio and the hubbub of many voices.

"Bury him," she said at last. "That's what they do with bodies. They bury them."

Mr. Willows regarded the erstwhile Carl Bentley distastefully.

"We'd have to dig a regular Panama Canal to tuck that body in," he observed. "Why didn't you philander with a dwarf if you had to amuse yourself?"

"Wish I had now," said Sally. "By the time we've finished a trench for this one, the neighbors will think we're getting ready for a barbecue."

"A quaint whimsy," murmured Tim. "The bottle, please."

While Tim was drinking, the handle of the kitchen door rattled violently and a man's voice called out, "What goes on in there, a murder or something?"

"Something," called back Sally. "Go away and rattle another door."

"Oh, Sally," came a girl's voice. "What we know about you."

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her," murmured Sally.

"That wisecrack about murder wasn't so dulce," remarked Mr. Willows. "We should be doing something about this body of ours. So far we're safe. Dopey was the only other witness and he crammed himself so deep in his box I doubt if he saw anything. He hasn't opened his eyes since. Guess he never will. Dogs don't like murders."

"Well, I don't exactly gloat over them myself," said Sally. "Somehow or other I don't feel like the wife of a murderer, but never having been the wife of a murderer before, of course I don't know. How do you feel?"

"Just like a murderer," was Tim's moody reply. "Like Landru, Bluebeard, and Jack the Ripper. That's how I feel."

"It must be awful."

"It is. Break out another bottle, Sally."

Sally went to the cupboard and extracted from its recesses another bottle of gin. Tim opened it and drank.

"Ugh!" he muttered. "Rotten stuff. At least he won't have a hangover."

"Yes," said Sally, reaching for the bottle. "He's got you to thank for that."

"You know," observed her husband, "what gets the best of me is that we're taking this murder altogether too calmly.

From the way we sit here and discuss it you'd think we polished off some guy every night of our lives."

"It's the gin," explained Sally, nodding wisely. "And then again, people make too much fuss about murders. They're not nearly so bad as they're painted. I've felt much more upset over a game of bridge."

"You're heartless as hell. One of us should feel sorry for this body."

"Oh, I feel sorry for it, but that doesn't help any. It was a good body."

"You seemed to enjoy it."

Sally looked at him reproachfully.

"Don't rub it in," she said. "I'll never have anything to do again with any person's body except yours."

"And you won't have much to do with that if we don't get rid of this one."

"I'm too dizzy to start in grave-digging right now," complained Sally. "Wow! I can hardly stand. Let's put it in the basement for the time being. No one goes down there but yourself."

"That," replied Tim admiringly, "is what I call a swell idea. We'll hide the beggar in the basement."

And hide the beggar they did. It was not a pretty sight to see as they pushed and dragged the body across the floor. Dopey, aroused by the noise, took one horrified look at what was going on, then disappeared from view. He decided to give the incident a miss. One had to draw the line somewhere.

Difficulties arose on the basement steps. They were steep steps, and Sally, who had gone first, found Mr. Bentley's feet pressing with undue emphasis against the pit of her stomach. She felt herself being shoved off into space.

"Can't you hold this body?" she gasped. "I can't stand its feet."

"What's wrong with his feet?" Mr. Willows inquired in an interested voice.

"There's nothing wrong with his feet, you repellent ass," replied Sally. "They're coming down too fast, that's all. Hold on to the body."

"Can't do it," groaned Tim. "It's too much. I can't hold on to my own body. Do you think you could hang on while I got a drink of gin?"

"Listen, sweetie," said Sally. "This isn't my murder, you know. It's all yours. If you don't stick around now I'll wash my hands of the body and call the whole show off. You can have the body."

"I don't want the body," replied Tim.

"Well, you can't wish it upon me. Do you think I want the body?"

"No," replied Tim. "But someone must want a body. I wonder who?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Sally. "You can't go round asking people if they happen to want a body."

"I guess not," admitted Tim. "They might ask me how I got the body in the first place."

"Exactly. And then where would you be?"

"I'd be rid of the body if they wanted it."

"But who wants a dead body, I'd like to know?"

"Well, I don't, for one," declared Tim emphatically. "I'm tired of dead bodies. Wish to God I'd never killed this one."

"Are we going to stand here all night in idle conversation?" asked Sally.

Tim was not standing. By this time he had flattened himself on his stomach and was clinging with aching fingers to the shoulders of the much discussed body. Dopey, who had been unable to restrain his curiosity, mistook his master's strange behavior for alluring indications of playfulness. Evidently everything was all right, thought the dog. That terrible still figure was going. Quietly he emerged from his box and with one bound landed in the middle of Mr. Willows's back. With a cry of utter horror Tim momentarily released his grip and the body began to slip.

"Hey!" called Sally. "What are you trying to do?"

Her question was never answered. Mr. Willows was too busy. Desperately he seized the body again, but it was too late. Mr. Bentley had evidently decided to take matters into his own hands without any further shillyshallying. He began to descend

purposefully into the darkness of the basement. Tim Willows was right behind him with Dopey on his back.

"I'm done for," panted Sally as the pressure of Mr. Bentley's feet grew irresistible. "Here I go and here it comes."

She abandoned all further effort and the body descended swiftly upon her as she slid down the steps. Mr. Willows and Dopey were close behind and then on top.

"I'm through," came Sally's discouraged voice in the darkness. "You might as well bury me too. There's not a whole bone in my body."

"Dopey did it," declared her husband. "Damn him."

"Whether Dopey did it or President Hoover, the result would be just the same," said Sally. "I'm a gone girl, that's all I know. Heave this body off and let me die in peace."

It was a ghastly position to be lying there in the darkness on and under a dead body with a demented dog scraping briskly about the place. Neither Sally nor Tim ever forgot it. It was one of the low lights of their lives.

Tim staggered to his feet and, after some painful groping, switched on the light. Then he bestowed upon the rump of Dopey one of the most venomous kicks ever received by a dog. After he had rolled Mr. Bentley off Sally and lifted her to her feet, they both stood swaying above the body and gazed down at it with reproachful eyes.

"That's no way for a body to act," complained Tim. "It's more dangerous than a thing of life."

"Well, if that rolling pin didn't finish him this certainly has," remarked Sally. "Let's get the cadaver out of the way. I'm sick of the very sight of it."

"Hadn't we better cover it up in the coal bin?" suggested her husband.

"Not a bad idea after all we've been through," remarked Sally. "Between us we'd make one competent murderer."

Between them and with the interference of Dopey, who had come to regard the body with jovial familiarity, they succeeded in dragging the remains of Mr. Bentley into the coal bin. Tim Willows found a shovel and began to sprinkle coal over the unpleasant object.

"This is awful," he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "I can hardly bring myself to do it. If people only knew how much trouble a murder involves they'd resort to some other method."

"You should have killed him outside the house," replied Sally, "or in his own bed."

"You're worse than Lady Macbeth," retorted Mr. Willows, with a slight shudder. "By rights you should be taking this murder very much to heart, yet here you go complaining because I didn't kill him in his own bed. I could never do a thing like that.

"Why not?"

"What, wake a chap up only to put him to sleep for good? Horrible."

"Why wake him up?"

Mr. Willows paused, with shovel lifted, and looked at his wife.

"Hadn't thought of that," he admitted. "But just the same it doesn't seem such a nice way to murder a person."

"And I suppose you consider whanging a man over the head with a rolling pin, shooting him down a flight of steps, and then sprinkling him liberally with coal is a nice way to do him in?"

"No, I don't," replied Tim, "and that's a fact, but you see, this is my first murder and I didn't have any time to plan it. It just happened on the spur of the moment, so to speak. In I come and down he goes. He dies and I'm a murderer. It seems too damn simple to suit me."

"Then order your murders better in the future," said Sally. "Do hurry up. I'm getting the horrors down here. The gin is wearing off."

"Keep the damn dog out of my way. He's trying to dig this body out," replied Tim.

Moved by a sudden inspiration he pulled off Mr. Bentley's shoes, then proceeded to submerge him in coal until the last of the body was seen. He was about to turn away when he paused hesitantly.

"Shouldn't we say a little something?" he asked Sally. "Some sort of prayer."

"Name one," challenged that young lady.

"Well, I don't know exactly," he hedged. "Seems sort of cold-blooded to leave him here without some little thought. How about, 'Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep'?"

Sally laughed unpleasantly.

"He didn't lay him down, dearie," she explained. "He was jolly well bashed down."

"We might pray to God to forgive him for making me a murderer," suggested Mr. Willows.

"He's your responsibility, not mine," said Sally indifferently. "Go ahead and take the matter up with God. I'm going to get a drink before I throw a fit."

"You're a hard woman, Sally," murmured Tim regretfully, "but perhaps a drink would be the best thing after all."

Picking up the shoes of the departed Bentley, he switched out the light and followed his wife up the steps to the kitchen. Dopey sought his box while they sought the bottle.

"Now," said Tim with satisfaction, "you're as much a murderer as I am. You're an accessory after the fact. We can both get the chair. What do you think of that?"

"I don't think so much of that, you worm," she answered. "As a matter of fact, I think so little of that that I've a good mind to go in right now and call up the police."

"That would make you a squealer," Tim informed her scornfully.

"What do I care?" she retorted. "I'll squeal like a pig if I feel like it."

"Go on and squeal like a pig," said her husband. "Squeal like a couple of pigs, for all I care."

"I can't squeal like a pig," Sally replied sadly. "I don't know how. Give me another spot of gin or I'll squeal like a mouse."

"Then," said Mr. Willows, passing his wife the bottle, "the wisest thing that you can do is to go back to that bunch of drunken morons and make out that Bentley's gone home. Tell 'em he left by the back way and that I've gone to bed. Get his coat and hat out of sight as quickly as possible, then break up

the party. I'm going to put on those shoes and make misleading tracks in the snow. Lock the kitchen door and remove the key after you. I'll lock the back door when I return."

The moment the winter night struck Mr. Willows full in the face, reason forsook him. For a long time he wandered round in the snow, leaving what he hoped were misleading tracks in his wake, but presently he forgot all about this, and finding himself standing in front of a house of vaguely familiar aspect, and suddenly realizing he was exceedingly cold, he mounted the steps and unceremoniously entered the front door. In the vestibule he dimly remembered that a very pretty woman lived in this house, a Mrs. Claire Meadows, whose husband was ever absent and whose moral and social status was ever a subject of interest to those who had little interest left in life. He had met this shapely, vivid-lipped creature on several occasions and on this occasion he met her again.

As he entered the softly illuminated sitting room he saw her lying in nothing very much on a large divan. Eyes, lips, and silk stockings formed his first impression. Gradually he became aware of an aura of flame-colored hair and a dead white throat.

"Hello," she said rather huskily. "I knew you would come sometime."

"How'd you know that?" asked Tim suspiciously.

"Because you're the most interesting man in town and I'm the most interesting woman," he was told. Then she caught sight of his feet, burdened as they were with the huge shoes of a dead man. "God in heaven!" she exclaimed. "Why the Charlie Chaplin effect and why the pajamas and dressing robe? Did you come here to sleep, by chance?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Willows. "By chance."

She watched him with her deep blue shadow-touched eyes as he crossed the room and picked up the book she had been reading.

"*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*," he read, seating himself beside her as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "I've always liked that book. I'm glad you do too. I like you, you know."

"I need a little liking," she said in a low voice. "I don't de-

serve it, perhaps, but that doesn't keep me from needing it. This world is not overkind. I much prefer Alice's."

He reached out and stroked the cool skin of her white throat, and all the time the woman's eyes were upon him. Her hands lay open at her sides, their palms upturned.

When Tim Willows left the house of Mrs. Claire Meadows some time later he had completely demolished still another commandment, for, as has been previously suggested, Tim Willows could not tolerate half measures.

"I feel that someone is dreaming me," she said as he left, "and that when the dreamer awakes I won't be here any more."

"When you awake," he told her, "perhaps I, too, shall be gone."

Sally was in bed and peacefully sleeping when Tim turned into his. His mind was in utter confusion, filled with blank and vivid patches, with slowly revolving colors that comforted and accused. The events of the night formed themselves before his eyes and whirled blindingly like same weird effect seen on the screen. His thoughts were drugged to sleep.

A few hours later when the light was dirtily dim he awoke to find a tall, ghastly figure standing by his bed. The figure was wavering unsteadily as if moved by a spirit wind. Tim recognized the figure only too well, but no face of a living man could be as white as the face that Carl Bentley held down to him now. Tim was electrified with horror. He was shocked even more when words came out of the face . . . dull, mumbled words with a far-off sound.

"Move over," moaned the apparition. "Move over. I must lie down."

"Move over?" said Tim incredulously. "Me move over? Good God! I'll do more than that. I'll move clean out. You can have the whole damn bed."

He sat up with a springlike snap and the figure started back, its eyes fixed with terror on the face of Tim Willows. A sudden, fearful memory gripped the tall, wavering shape. The face it saw was the face of a man it associated with the most deadly peril—death itself. One wild shriek pierced the silence as the figure turned with fluttering hands and fled from the

room. Sally woke up in time to see it go. Immediately she disappeared beneath the coverings at which her husband was clawing with frenzied fingers.

"Oh-o-o-o-o dear, good little God, what was that?" she chattered. "Don't pull those covers down. Stop it! Stop, I tell you!"

"I've got to pull those covers down," said Tim, tremulously. "That horror actually wanted to get in bed with me. Imagine that. He might come back and try to do it again."

"But if he sees you over here," she protested, "he might follow and try to get in."

"He won't get a chance to see me," said Tim, "and if he does we'll just tell him flat there isn't any more room."

"You'll tell him," retorted Sally, letting her husband in. "I'll have nothing to do with a ghost, particularly with one of your making."

Tim pulled the covers securely over his head.

"Of all the nerve," he murmured. "The appalling thing tried to get me to move over."

"Pretty clubby for a man you've just murdered," said Sally. "Magnanimous, I calls it. Sinister."

"Shut up! He mightn't know."

"Spirits know all," said Sally bleakly.

"Perhaps this one is dumb," replied Tim, reaching for a straw. "I hope to God we're still squiffed and merely imagining things. Of all the damned nights."

Mr. Ram gazed disapprovingly down upon the headless bed. Things were getting out of hand . . . going far too far.

Chapter IV. Mr. Gibber Leaves the Room

TIM WILLOWS'S PIOUS HOPE THAT HE WAS IMAGINING THINGS fell far short of fulfillment. Not only was it totally disregarded, but also virtually flung in his face.

Rising with a clamorous head the next morning, he gulped down some coffee, and leaving Sally still painfully sleeping, rushed from the house and along the too familiar ways that led to the station. He had had neither the time nor the inclina-

tion to visit the body in the bin. Sally would have to see to that. He scarcely cared whether she saw to it or not. Tim Willows was so nauseatingly sick and disgusted that he would have greatly preferred a quiet cell in the death house to a weary day at the office.

Of all the ghastly trips he had ever made to the station—and he had made many—this morning's was by all odds the most like that. Never before had he achieved such abject and unqualified depths of physical, mental, and spiritual demoralization. Never before had he carried to the office such consciousness of guilt and awareness of impending evil. His body was sick and his soul was sick. He was unable to meet the eyes of the meanest of living creatures. Think as he would, he could find no redeeming quality within himself nor could he see any hope of salvation in the future. The sky ahead was drenched with ink and aggressively sinister. Soon it would swoop silently down and blot him out—smother him lingeringly. One circumstance alone saved him from going completely mad and running around in frenzied circles before the disapproving eyes of his fellow commuters. He was too physically debilitated to care a great deal whether or not he was a murderer. His mind had not yet had the opportunity to grasp the terrible significance of what he had done. That would come later in all its stark, blinding reality. Yes, there were many unpleasant things Tim Willows had to face. At the moment his reactions were merely mechanical. His conduct was dictated by sheer force of habit. Automatically he moved and thought, and with the nice instinct of a sick animal he isolated himself as well as he could from the main body of commuters exhaling frosty puffs along the station platform. A through train swept by. It was headed in the opposite direction, leaving New York behind. There was a dumb appeal in Tim's eyes as he watched the swift passage of that train. He wished he himself were aboard it, bound away to parts unknown.

A few minutes later his own train glided in and came to a clanking stop. Like a man voluntarily approaching his own doom he climbed wearily aboard, found a seat next to a window, and arranged the protective screen of his newspaper

round the upper half of his body. So far he had successfully avoided exchanging a word of greeting with a single acquaintance. He prayed that his Jovian aloofness would remain inviolate.

"Well, here goes nothing," he said to himself as the train pulled out. "I wonder who's missing Mr. Bentley now? Probably the whole damn lot of them."

He had been such a hale and hearty commuter, Bentley, one of the most depressing types. And back home in the coal bin Mr. Bentley's body was getting worse and worse. Involuntarily Tim shuddered. That lifeless body was looming larger on his horizon. It was taking more definite shape and growing more fraught with menace. Slow waves of horror churned up the nausea within his system. Print swam before his aching eyes as he strove to return to reason through the medium of an advertisement announcing a drastic reduction in the price of fur coats. Sally needed a new coat. She could wear it to the trial. A woman with a soft white throat, and a figure that shrieked in the night. Why had there been no blood?

A heavy man sank down beside him and Tim edged over closer to the window. He dreaded the sound of a voice, but no voice was forthcoming, only a ponderous sigh. Apparently his companion was mortally weary. Tim vaguely wondered what could be the nature of the trouble that had produced such a sigh. Another one fell like a swooning body on the lap of his meditations. This was awful. The man must have committed a whole series of murders. Probably wiped out an entire family. Decapitated it. Tim feared that if the man did not stop sighing he would begin to sigh himself. Then he decided that he had not sufficient energy to heave even the ghost of a sigh. The mere business of breathing was difficult enough. His lungs felt burdened. Not so his companion's. His lungs continued to bellow forth sighs of increasingly tragic mournfulness. Tim had never heard such sighs. They seemed to proceed from the grave itself. He turned his eyes to the snow-patched fields and tried to forget the sounds. But no one could forget such sighs. They made themselves felt as well as heard. They were the palpable expression of misery. Unable to bear up under them any longer

Tim turned from the window and appealingly confronted the man. One glance was all that was needed to galvanize him into panic-stricken action. Apparently the man's reactions were exactly those of Tim's. Both made a convulsive effort to remove themselves from the seat with the utmost possible speed. Both were pale and trembling. Both were desperate men. Their minds were so thoroughly atrophied that they failed to realize that if either one of them would only remain quietly seated the other would most willingly withdraw. As it was, in their passionate scramble they effectively succeeded in wedging each other inextricably in the narrow space. Perhaps no two men in all the world were less desirous of such propinquity. Tim's haggard face thrust itself out into the aisle as if detached from the rest of his body. The man's feet were shuffling busily on the floor of the car. He was running in spirit if not in body. He wanted to run with both.

"Water!" gasped Tim, to anyone who might happen to be theoretically interested in thirsts. "Wanna get water."

"Water!" inanely babbled his companion, apparently too far gone to think up anything for himself. "Must go get some water."

"Then I don't want any," said Tim hurriedly. "I'm not thirsty. You go get water."

"I can't," panted the man. "You're holding me back."

"Holding you back?" exploded Tim with a short hysterical laugh. "I wouldn't touch a hand to your mouldering body for all the gold in the mint."

"That's all right, then," said Mr. Bentley, sinking back on the seat and carrying Tim along with him. "I thought you were going to strike me."

The sudden revulsion of feelings caused by finding alive and kicking the man he had thought to be lying at that moment stark dead in his coal bin moved Tim profoundly. Even now he was not sure of his ground, yet it must be so. Spirits did not get wedged between seats or try to escape the blows of mere mortals. No, Carl Bentley was real enough, and Tim Willows almost collapsed on the spot under the stress of his emotions.

"Strike you?" he managed to blurt out. "I haven't the slightest desire to do such a thing. I'd much rather hug you."

"Don't do that," said Mr. Bentley stiffly. "You've done quite enough to me already."

"All right," replied Tim rather humbly. "I won't, but are you sure you're not murdered?"

"No," said Mr. Bentley. "I'm not sure. I might die at any minute. I feel that way. I feel very much that way, let me tell you."

Tim considered this information for a moment and took comfort in it.

"I'll let you tell me," he observed at last. "And you can die at any minute for all I care just as long as you're out of my coal bin. I wouldn't mind at all. As a matter of fact, I'd like to see you die. I'd enjoy it."

"Don't work yourself up to a pitch," the other put in hastily. "I feel very, very ill."

"I will work myself up to a pitch," retorted Mr. Willows. "I'll work myself up to a terrific pitch. What the hell do you mean messing round with my wife?"

"That is easily explained," replied Mr. Bentley. "It was all a mistake. Simply and truly a dreadful mistake."

Tim Willows laughed nastily.

"I hope you discovered your mistake," he said.

"Oh, I did," the other replied. "The moment I came to and found myself buried beneath a lot of nasty coal I knew some mistake had been made."

"It had," remarked Mr. Willows. "I should have put on more coal."

"Well, managed to dig myself out somehow and to crawl upstairs. My head ached terribly."

"Good," quoth Tim feelingly.

Ignoring his companion's elation Carl Bentley went on with his story.

"I was terribly confused," he said. "Nearly dead. Quite actually nearly dead. You can imagine. To come to one's senses beneath a pile of coal in total darkness and with a head that feels twice its normal size is not an agreeable sensation."

"That's what happens to men who get gay with my wife," Tim Willows told him. "That and worse."

Mr. Bentley chose to disregard this unfriendly remark also.

"There was a bottle of gin on the kitchen table," he continued, "and I finished off what was left of it."

"I must have overlooked that," observed Tim regretfully.

"Yes, it was there," said Carl Bentley, "and I drank it. But the doors were locked and I had no shoes. No shoes at all. Have you seen my shoes by any chance, Willows?"

"One can hardly help seeing them," replied Tim. "Go on with your story."

"Well, I went up the back stairs," Bentley resumed, "and then my mind must have gone blank. I don't remember anything after that. Apparently I contrived to get home somehow, but I was minus my hat, overcoat, and shoes."

"You tried to get in bed with me," said Tim accusingly.

"Then I must have been drunk," Mr. Bentley declared. "Couldn't tell one bed from the other."

"What the hell do you mean by that?" demanded Tim.

"Nothing," said the other hastily. "Absolutely nothing. Don't know what could have made me say it. I'm still frightfully confused and upset and all. For God's sake don't work yourself up to another pitch, old man. I'm not strong enough to stand it."

"Pitch, me eye," muttered Tim. "I'd like to pitch you out in the middle of the aisle. That's what you deserve."

"Don't do it," pleaded Mr. Bentley. "I beg of you not to do it. You should be grateful to me for freeing you from the stigma of murder."

"I have your thick skull to thank for that."

"Yet the skull belongs to me."

"But you're not responsible for its thickness."

"Then you can't blame me for that."

"For what?"

Mr. Bentley looked perplexed.

"I don't quite know myself," he replied. "I seem to have lost the thread."

"Damn if I know what we're talking about," said Tim Willows. "Don't let's talk."

"Perhaps it would be better," agreed Carl Bentley. "Then you won't work yourself up to a pitch."

"That doesn't matter at all," snapped Mr. Willows. "I can work myself up to a pitch whether I talk or not."

"Try not to," murmured Bentley soothingly. "Be calm. You don't look at all well."

"Is that so?" retorted Mr. Willows brightly. "Well, you look fit for a hospital, yourself—you and your stomach-ripping sighs."

"Better that than an inquest," said Carl Bentley significantly.

With an inner tremor Tim turned back to the window and allowed Carl Bentley to have the last word. The man was right. His, Tim's, escape had been a narrow one. Just an ounce or two more energy behind Mrs. Twill's time-honored rolling pin and he would be sitting there a full-fledged murderer, a murderer with hardly any prospects of escape. Sick as he was he still felt that it was good to be at large and alive. Accordingly it was a greatly relieved Mr. Willows who dismissed Carl Bentley with a wave of his hand at the station and made his way up Park Avenue to the office building in which the Nation-wide Advertising, Inc. awaited whatever it might devour.

The layout of this flourishing establishment was designed to submerge the ego of the most arrogant of mortals. If any caller chanced to have a wee bit of an inferiority complex lurking about his system the atmosphere of this place immediately brought it to full bloom. On entering the offices a prospective client who had been prepared to spend fifty thousand dollars in advertising hastily decided to spend at least fifty thousand more for fear of being snubbed by the reception clerk, cut by the office boy, and sneered at by the president's secretary.

Everything was gorgeous. Everything was superior. Rich leather, subdued lighting, and wrought-iron work merged themselves into endless vistas of harmonious opulence relieved here and there by a slightly exotic touch of color. One gained the impression that unlike almost any other kind of writing

the creation of advertisements required an environment of ease and refinement.

It was into this environment that Tim Willows stepped, feeling neither at ease nor consciously refined.

"Good-morning, baby," he said to a gorgeous girl at a gorgeous desk. "I'd like to use the lounge in your rest room if none of the girls objects."

"You're not a good man, Mr. Willows," she told him. "You're a bad, bad man. I'm sorry about you."

"Then give me a spot of something, sweetheart, or I'll die right here before your eyes on this lousily gorgeous Persian rug."

The girl gave him a critical look, then, opening a drawer in her desk, hastily poured some whiskey from a pint flask into a paper cup, which she passed to Tim.

"Go over to the cooler," she said in level tones, "and pretend you're getting a drink of water."

"Thanks," answered Tim, eagerly seizing the cup. "I already know the technique thoroughly."

He tossed off the drink, crumpled up the evidence, and accepted a mint tablet from his calm-eyed benefactress.

"I wouldn't have done that for everyone," she told him.

"And you're quite right, too," agreed Tim Willows. "The rest of these copy writers are a lot of dogs. Don't have a thing to do with them. Don't give them an inch. Just me."

"Don't hang around here any longer," she said. "You look like the devil to-day. I wish you'd behave yourself for a couple of months. Better pretend you have a bad cold."

When he had gone the girl gazed musingly at the spot where he had been.

"All the interesting ones get married," she thought, "and all of the interesting ones are bad, thoroughly bad. He isn't really bad, though. He just doesn't understand about morals. He's too good for this place. He doesn't belong here."

Meanwhile Tim, no little resuscitated, tossed his hat and coat at a friendly office boy and joined a file of his confreres making its way into the conference room.

"What's up?" he asked Steve Jones. "Are we praying for rain and prosperity this morning?"

"Same old thing," replied Steve bitterly. "Just talk, talk, talk. The Old Man's getting gaga. Damned if I know what it's all about. You've been drinking."

He looked at Tim with an enviously accusing eye.

"Lots," agreed that gentleman. "I've been through a great deal, Steve. Altogether too much."

"And you're going through a lot more," muttered Steve, "before he's finished with us."

They passed into the handsomely appointed conference room and found seats at a long table, at the end of which stood Mr. Gibber beaming good-morningly.

Mr. Gibber was a large man. He gave one the impression of being almost too large a man. He had a large, well-fed face coated with an expensively acquired tan. Mr. Gibber collected tans. He brought them back with him from diverse parts of the globe he so ornately decorated. He brought back his tans from Bermuda, from Florida, and from various sections of the Riviera.

"There's nothing like travel," he would tell various members of his staff, "to keep a man physically fit and mentally alert. I wish we could all run across to the Continent at least once a year. But everything comes with time—with time and hard work."

"How true," Tim had once replied to this optimistic utterance. "Even death itself. You know, Mr. Gibber, they tell me that all good Americans go to Paris when they die. Perhaps that's how we'll get there."

Mr. Gibber was not amused.

And Mr. Gibber had hands. Large, brown hands that he rubbed and rerubbed. He was always immaculately dressed, impeccably manicured, and crisply groomed. It was almost as if he wanted to prove to the world that he was a clean man with nice, neat habits.

Tim regarded the man with something akin to affectionate contempt, and Mr. Gibber returned his gaze with the tolerance of one who realized it was in his power to discharge the impertinent young puppy on the spot. As he looked at the gentlemen seated round the table Mr. Gibber's eyes seemed to be

saying, "I bought that new tie for you. Those socks are indirectly mine. And you there, down at the end, had it not been for me you'd never have got that suit of clothes. You're all mine, the whole lot of you, down to your very drawers."

However, he greeted them all with what he fondly believed to be just the right balance of benign paternalism and presidential authority. Behind his most sunny words there always seemed to lurk the suggestion of a sudden cold snap with thin days ahead. He played, for all there was in it, the part of the upper dog.

"Gentlemen," he began this morning. "Fellow workers in this vast organization. Men of the Nationwide Advertising Agency—and that includes you, Miss Meades, ha ha, ahem—hope you don't mind—where was I? Oh, yes—co-creators of national prosperity," Mr. Gibber's voice dropped impressively, "We must not waste words. Words are valuable. The flashing wings of thought. We must not waste them."

Mr. Gibber then proceeded to give a loquacious dissertation on the virtues of brevity. Leaning far over the table on which his hands were spread, he swayed slightly from the vibrations of his powerfully controlled emotions.

"Nationwide Advertising Agency," he repeated with almost sinister intensity. "Men, do you get the full significance of that? Do you realize what it means—nation wide—those two words? Do you grasp it?" Here Mr. Gibber grasped it, opened his clenched fingers and examined it, then, with a forceful gesture, flung it rather rudely in the faces of his listeners. "It means this exactly," he continued with awful calmness. "Take the nation in all its length. Take the nation in all its breadth. Take the nation in all its thickness." He looked piercingly round to assure himself that everyone had taken the nation in the manner he had suggested. "Then take this organization," he went on. "Take it in all its ramifications and superimpose it upon the nation. It means, men, putting the two together, that we're just as wide as it. Sitting here in this gorgeously appointed room we are exactly as wide as America. Hence our name—the Nationwide Advertising Agency."

Mr. Gibber sat down with disconcerting suddenness and

tried to look exactly as wide as the nation. He very nearly succeeded. He did look almost as thick. In the face of such a huge conception the members of his staff appeared considerably shrunken. Having achieved the desired effect and for certain reasons of policy having to do with the discouraging of requests for raises it now pleased Mr. Gibber to look both severe and injured.

"Now, gentlemen," he resumed, rising to his feet and towering above them, "I hate to say it. I'm actually ashamed to say it, but I fear, I very much fear, all of you have been wasting words. Mr. Bunce informs me that of late the copy mortality has been alarmingly high." Pause. "Dangerously high." Another pause. "Disgracefully high." A most portentous pause. "This can't go on. There will have to be changes. You have ceased to look for the fundamental idea upon which every campaign and every piece of copy in that campaign should be based and must be based. Words have been wasted—squandered shamefully. You have done it, this thing."

Like criminals the men of the Nationwide Advertising Agency looked at the outraged Gibber, then accusingly at one another. Who had been wasting all those words? Who had been squandering Mr. Gibber's most precious commodity? Tim Willows felt that he could do with a great deal less of what was going on. His head was full of rebellious thoughts and stale fumes of gin. Surely this man Gibber deserved to be murdered most brutally and finally. There was no justification for his continued presence on earth. The man was speaking again. He had them all at his mercy. Tim groaned spiritually as well as physically.

"Men," resumed Mr. Gibber, "brevity is the breath of conviction, terseness the bone, and briskness the blood."

He interrupted himself at this point to jot down a note about his last utterance. It was good, he thought. Good enough for that book he was writing, that sensational book showing how Christianity had been handicapped and its rapid spread retarded because the Nationwide Advertising Agency had not been in existence during the time of Christ. His note finished, Mr. Gibber fixed the table with a threatening eye.

"Now listen to me," he said slowly and distinctly. "I want more punch in your copy. I want more hooks and"—he pawed the air as if sifting it for the right word—"I want more pith."

Mr. Gibber's last want almost finished Tim Willows. He fixed the man with round, incredulous eyes and asked in his blandest manner: "You want more what, sir?"

Mr. Gibber hesitated, then faced the situation like a man.

"I said pith," he replied with painful distinctness. "I want more pith. I must have more pith."

"You mean the stuff that goes into helmets?" Tim continued innocently.

Mr. Gibber's thoughts were somewhat confused. Tim's unexpected question had thrown him off his stride.

"What do you mean?" demanded Gibber gropingly. "Only heads go into helmets."

"I know," said Tim. "Only heads should go into helmets, but lots of things could go into them, things like pith and all."

"How should I know what goes into helmets?" asked the exasperated Mr. Gibber. "Why should I care what goes into helmets?"

"Oh, of course," replied Tim in a hurt voice. "I didn't know you felt so strongly on the subject. Let's say no more about helmets."

"I don't know why anything was said about them in the first place," said Mr. Gibber, striving to control himself.

"It was in connection with the word 'pith,' " observed Tim helpfully. "We were just wondering if it went into helmets."

"Do I understand you to say that I was wondering whether pith went into helmets or not?" asked Mr. Gibber.

"And heads," added Tim.

"But of course heads go into helmets," said Mr. Gibber. "That's what they're for."

"I hope you don't think I didn't know that," replied Tim, laughing deprecatingly.

"But I made no implication that you didn't know what went into helmets," said Gibber.

"Of course I do," answered Tim brightly. "We all know.

It's heads. Not pith, but heads. Did your head ever go into a helmet, Mr. Gibber?"

The good man was immediately mollified. His vanity was stimulated. It pleased him to be regarded as an extensively traveled person.

"Time and time again," he replied. "As a matter of face I have one at home right now."

"And is there any pith in it?" asked Tim hopefully.

Mr. Gibber's tan took on an apoplectic glow.

"I don't," he replied in a voice choked with emotion, "I don't know what's in that helmet, and frankly, Mr. Willows, I don't give a damn." He took a deep breath and added, "Will you excuse me, Miss Meades?"

"Do you mean you want to leave the room for a minute?" asked that young lady innocently.

"What!" ejaculated Mr. Gibber. "And why should I leave the room?"

"Mr. Gibber," said Miss Meades reprovingly, then lowered her eyes in confusion.

"You don't understand, Miss Meades," Tim explained politely. "Mr. Gibber doesn't want to leave the room. He doesn't need to leave the room. That is, I don't think so. He was——"

"I didn't say he needed to leave the room," Miss Meades interrupted hotly. "If he needed to leave the room I hope he'd have sense enough to go."

"Of course he has," answered Tim soothingly. "He knows when he needs to go."

"Well, I need to go right now," gasped Steve Jones. "Excuse me a minute. Must telephone to a client."

Mr. Gibber was looking at the table with appalled eyes. Was it possible they were making sport of him? Willows was at the bottom of it all. Willows was responsible. How in God's name had the situation got so out of hand? It was like a bad dream.

"It's all right, Mr. Gibber," he heard Tim saying in an encouraging voice. "She knows now that you don't need to leave the room and that you were simply asking her pardon for using a lot of bad language. Funny how things crop up

like that—helmets and pith and leaving the room and all. Really, it's quite confusing. Where were we, Mr. Gibber?"

"Where were we?" repeated that gentleman, wearily passing a hand across his eyes. "I hardly know where we are much less where we were."

"It had something to do with brevity," supplied Tim. "It was all very interesting even though most of the others didn't seem to understand it."

"I understood every word he said," stoutly declared Miss Meades. "Even about leaving the room."

"Certainly you did," put in Tim pacifically, "Mr. Gibber isn't so childish. He'd never do a thing like that."

"Like what?" snapped Miss Meades in a stubborn voice.

Tim looked at the girl with admiring eyes.

"Well, I wouldn't like to say," he hedged. "Hadn't you better ask Mr. Gibber?"

"Don't ask me a thing," Mr. Gibber shouted. "I won't listen to another word."

"He doesn't like to talk about it," explained Tim. "You know how it is. Nobody does. No gentleman, that is."

"But I will talk about it," Mr. Gibber cut in. "I'll talk about it as much as I like."

"Is that quite necessary?" inquired Miss Meades, elevating her eyebrows.

"Yes, by God, it is," gritted the president of the Nationwide Advertising Agency. "It's necessary for my sanity. It's nobody's business whether I need to leave the room or not. And if I do need to leave the room—which I don't—I'll get right up and walk out of the room and stay as long as I like."

"What did I tell you?" said Tim triumphantly to the table. "He knows how to act."

Miss Meades turned on him with battle in her usually calm eyes.

"I won't let you put me in a false light," she retorted. "From the way you go on one would get the impression that I deliberately accused Mr. Gibber of not knowing when he needed to leave the room. I meant no such thing. I know he isn't a baby and furthermore——"

"Stop!" cried Mr. Gibber. "For God's sake, stop! I must put my foot down somewhere. This can't go on."

"Certainly not," agreed Tim sympathetically. "Of all things."

Mr. Gibber cleared his throat and once more flattened his hands on the surface of the table. With an earnest eye he searched the races confronting him. He would win his listeners back.

"Boys," he addressed them this time, playing the part of just a pal. "Boys," he repeated, then his expression underwent a startling change. "Oh, dear," he muttered. "Now I do have to leave the room."

And leave the room he did, very rapidly and without looking back.

Miss Meades made a face and thrust out a small, red tongue at Tim Willows.

"Smarty," she said. "Mr. Know-it-all. He did need to leave the room all the time."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Tim told her with tremendous dignity. "I attribute the man's strange conduct to nothing more nor less than the power of suggestion."

"Which means," retorted the girl, "that he needed to leave the room."

"You win," said Tim.

Chapter V. The Malicious Magic of Mr. Ram

MR. GIBBER DID NOT RETURN TO THE CONFERENCE ROOM. FEW men would have in the face of such overwhelming odds. Instead, he sought the privacy of his office in which he did some highly concentrated fuming. Gibber's skin was thick but not impenetrable. Tim Willows and that Meades girl had done terrible things to him that morning. He would not forget the pair. When the trees began to fall they would be the first to go.

Meanwhile the conference, relieved of the presence of its

presiding officer, was rapidly assuming the aspect of a meeting of convivial friends from which those earnest spirits in whose nostrils advertising was the very breath of life promptly dis-associated themselves amid the maledictions of the harder-boiled.

Tim Willows and Miss Meades were among the last to leave. They decided it was no more than their duty to await the return of Mr. Gibber. They were conscientious about it. While so doing there was nothing to prevent them from discussing the more important things of life such as books and plays and places to go and the numerous persons they disliked. It was a quiet, restful morning and Tim was both surprised and delighted to discover upon consulting his watch that it was time to be doing something about luncheon. Accordingly he took Dolly Meades to a lunch club at which they prolonged the conference well into the afternoon. Tim drank ale, which Dolly was unable to stomach. She had to be satisfied with rye. And she was. Back at the office Tim spent the remainder of the afternoon listening to the bedtime stories of several newspaper and magazine representatives, all of whom displayed a sort of well-bred pride in the quality and size of the circulations of their respective publications.

In this manner Tim passed his last day, had he but known it, at the Nationwide Advertising Agency, an organization to which he had already given almost all of his self-respect in return for just sufficient money to enable him to exist in comparative ease, what with buying things on time.

Sally did not meet him at the station, but she was waiting for him at the door. As a matter of fact, when he opened it she almost popped out of the house.

"It's gone!" were her first words, her eyes round and fearful.

"What's gone?" asked Tim, his mind on other matters, chief among which was the possibility of getting a drink.

"The body," replied Sally. "It's gone. It's not there."

Tim then deliberately did a little husbandly tormenting.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded. "Whose body has gone where?"

"Don't be dull," continued Sally sharply. "The body in the

bin. The body of the man you murdered in cold blood. The body you struck down in its prime."

"Oh, that body," exclaimed Tim comprehendingly. "That body never had any prime."

"Well, it would have had a prime if you hadn't struck it down," retorted Sally.

"How do you know that?" her husband asked. "Some bodies never have any prime."

"Yours, for example," said Sally. "Your withered mean, little rat of a body."

"Come, come," protested Tim Willows. "That's no way to refer to your husband's body. Why, only last night you were swearing to high heaven you were never going to have anything to do with anyone's body save the one you are now so harshly criticizing."

"Well, prime or no prime," said Sally, "I've got to make the best of it such as it is."

"You mean the most of it," he told her crisply. "And I do wish you'd stop referring to my body as if it were a rather questionable rib of beef. Now tell me about this other body. You seem to miss it. Do you want it back in the bin? I should think the disappearance of that long, lugubrious stiff has saved us no end of mental anguish, not to mention unremunerative labor."

"I know," she said, "but we can't have a dead body knocking about the streets. People will begin to talk."

Tim laughed shortly.

"I suppose they'll criticize us for not knowing how to entertain a dead body," he remarked. "Well, if that dead body has left my bed and board I wash my hands of all further responsibility for it. It's not my dead body if it goes visiting neighbors."

"But suppose it hasn't gone visiting?" asked Sally in a hushed voice. "Suppose it tries to crawl in bed with one of us to-night? That's what's burning me up."

"Then it will be a doubly dead body," said Tim, who, having divested himself of his hat and overcoat, was strolling in the direction of a cocktail shaker gleaming cheerfully on the side-

board. "By the way," he called back casually over his shoulders, "that dead body rather intimated to me that he mistook my bed for yours this morning."

"The nerve of the thing," said Sally, then, suddenly grasping the full significance of Tim's remark, she asked, "What do you mean by that, you grub?"

"Nothing," the other replied. "Merely that the grub rode into the city this morning in the poisonous company of that dead body."

"What!" gasped Sally. "Do you mean the body has taken up traveling?"

"Just that," returned the other. "The body was most unappreciatively alive. Only the body, though, for as you yourself know, it never did have any brain."

Sally sank down in a chair and considered this new situation. The dead body of Mr. Bentley was one thing. His live body was quite another.

"A body like that doesn't need any brain," she said at last. "Make it snappy with that cocktail, you shadow of a midget."

Tim rang for Peter and immediately that aged creature appeared. He was small, sharp, and unbent, and he gave the impression of having been kept too long in front of a drying machine. He had swapped all of his hair with the years in exchange for a face full of wrinkles. From somewhere near the center of this complicated system a thin hooked nose projected itself and on either side of this object two small eyes glittered as brightly as a thieving sparrow's. Peter had a way of swinging his arms at his sides as if he were keeping them in readiness for immediate action. Unlike the majority of domestics, he enjoyed being summoned to duty. If Tim did not call for him in the course of an evening he would invent an excuse to call on Tim, because, as he expressed it, Mr. Tim was his personal responsibility with whom he had spent many pleasant days in the past when both of them had been a whole lot younger.

Tim now fumbled in his vest pocket and produced three cigars, the day's gleanings from the visiting representatives.

"Here's your share, Peter," he said, extending them to the old man. "They look pretty good to-night. Better than usual."

Peter subjected each cigar to the expert examination of his nose, then permitted himself a smile of appreciation.

"Fifteen cents straight, at least," he gloated. "This one looks like a quarter. I shall smoke them, Mr. Tim."

"I know damn well you will," said Tim, "but in the meantime can you do a little something helpful about orange juice and ice?"

When the shaker had ceased its shaking and the cocktails had been poured, Tim turned to Sally.

"I don't know whether I'm to be congratulated or not," he told her, "but the fact is I don't happen to be a murderer any more. It all comes from not putting on enough coal. That body came to life some time after we went to bed, finished off a bottle of gin, and went barging drunkenly about the house before it went home."

"Was it—I mean, was he—in great pain?" asked Sally a little timidly.

"Yes," said Tim complacently, delicately moistening his lips at the rim of the glass. "He was in excruciating pain. Agony, I'd call it. I made him feel even worse."

"You would, you scorpion," his wife replied. "Does he know all the things that hapened to him—the part I played?"

"Not yet," he smiled. "I'm saving that for some future occasion, my dear little accessory after the fact."

Sally remained thoughtfully silent.

Because of a great lassitude induced by the high revelry and nervous tension of the previous night the Willowses did not linger long in the lounge after dinner had been served. Dopey appeared footily for a brief review of the events of the day, which he immediately forgot upon suspecting the presence of a few pieces of candy concealed in a bowl. After mouthing these individually and collectively he discovered they were not so good. Accordingly he left them messily on the rug and clumped back to his box in the kitchen and the soothing conversation of Mr. and Mrs. Twill. Tim and Sally proceeded to their room, where they became busy about going to bed. Tim was always a little puzzled at the speed and ease with which Sally completed these preparations. At one moment she would

be fully clad, at the next there would be just Sally, unadorned, then amazingly she would appear decked out in some tricky nightgown all set for the sheets. Tim decided that she must wear practically no clothes at all to be able to disrobe with such breath-taking precision and dispatch. For him the business of getting undressed was a long, involved, and laborious one necessitating no end of searching for this thing and that. The good Mrs. Twill believed in putting everything in some place but preferably not in the same place twice if a new one could be found. To-night, for example, he eventually found his slippers resting on a row of books on the lowest shelf of the bookcase. It was a good place, he had to admit, a splendid place, but then any place would have been good had he but known where it was. Thus cogitating on the strange ways of Sally and Mrs. Twill he came at last to his socks, and at this point he seemed to run down. After a few tentative pluckings his fingers ceased to work. He was thinking of Claire Meadows and wondering what she was thinking. That had been a queer experience, too. Like a song growing fainter in a swiftly fading dream. It seemed quite apart from life and the ordinary affairs of life. It was as if Time had suddenly remembered a moment it had forgotten to give him and had tossed it back at random. It could never be recaptured. He knew that, and strangely enough he was not disappointed.

"Tim," he heard Sally saying, and her voice sounded grimly determined, "if you don't stop doddering over those socks I'll come over there and drag them off."

"So you feel as strongly about it as that, do you?" replied Tim Willows, looking at her with a slow, irritating smile. "Well, what I want to know is, why should I take off these socks?"

"It's customary to take off one's socks before going to bed," his wife replied with withering dignity. "Gentlemen don't sleep in their socks."

"How do you know that?" Tim shot back. "From the way you talk one would gain the impression that you'd made a life study of sleeping gentlemen. Thousands of gentlemen are sleeping in their socks every night of the year. Sleeping in every-

thing—clothes and all, even their hats. And here's another thing. These socks are my socks and these feet are my feet and that bed is my bed. If I want to take these feet, clad in these socks, and tuck them into that bed I don't see that it's anyone's business save my own. What do you say to that?"

"I have nothing to say to that," replied Sally. "Nothing at all. Just the same, you and your socks constitute a form of mental torture that would fully justify a divorce in any enlightened community. You're so gross, so utterly common. You—you revolt me, you and your socks and your shirt and your thin flanks and——"

"My toes," interrupted Tim hotly. "Go on and pick on my toes. Say things about my toes. Your own toes are so damn crooked you look as if you were walking backward."

"That's a lie," said Sally, deeply insulted. "I have perfect toes and you know it. Take a look at other women's toes and see what scrambled monstrosities they are."

"I don't keep my eyes on the ground under such circumstances," said Tim virtuously.

"No doubt you don't," said his wife, "you lecherous little animal man."

"If anyone overheard this conversation," remarked Tim bitterly, "they wouldn't believe it possible. They'd put you down as mad."

"And I suppose you'd be considered an abused husband," said Sally, with elaborate sarcasm.

"That's stating it mildly," answered Tim. "All day long I've been working at the office, standing on wind-swept platforms and traveling on badly ventilated trains with the body of a man I almost murdered. I'm tired. I'm unstrung. I'm in a highly nervous condition. And all you can do is to throw my socks in my face."

"I think more of your socks than to throw them in that face," said Sally. "You'd bite a hole in 'em and swear I did it."

"Speaking figuratively," continued Tim in a weary voice. "You should know when I'm speaking figuratively."

"You're such a liar," broke in his wife, "that one never can tell just how you're speaking."

"And with the knowledge of murder in my heart," continued Tim as if he had not heard her. "I get up in the morning and carry on. I go to the office, by God, and put in a full day's work. Catch any other husband doing it. And you talk about socks."

"Exactly," Sally hastened to answer. "You wouldn't catch any other husband doing it, not even the lowest. You murder a man in the evening and the first thing in the morning you rush out of the house, leaving a dead body on my hands. How would you like to be cooped up in the house all day with a dead body? Pleasant, isn't it? Lovely."

"Why didn't you take a walk?" he demanded.

"And leave the dead body behind?" asked Sally.

"You couldn't very well have taken it with you," replied Tim. "And certainly a dead body doesn't demand much in the way of entertainment. You don't have to play games with a dead body."

Mr. Ram on the bookcase was rapidly losing patience. This constant, futile bickering was doing things to his usually tolerant and friendly disposition. He felt like taking the two of them and knocking their heads together. They deserved even less considerate treatment than that. Upon hearing Sally's next contribution the little man decided to go the limit.

"You and your work and your stuffy trains," she was saying. "It's all a lot of bunk. Horses couldn't have held you in this house. I'll bet you didn't draw an easy breath until you shut the door behind you. I guess you know what I mean now when I say I'd be glad to change places with you. I wish I could. I'm tired of being left alone in this house with dead bodies and clownish dogs and doddering old people who might die on my hands at any minute and add to the dead bodies. I want to change——"

"I daresay I'll come home some night and see you sitting on top of a pile of dead bodies," remarked Tim. "You'll be literally swimming in dead bodies. And by the way, lay off that dog of mine. He's far from clownish. I'd like to change places with you if only for the pleasure of being able to stay home and keep him company. He's a damn sight more agreeable than you."

"That settles it," said Mr. Ram to himself. "I'll have to take steps this very night."

"Then why don't you go and sleep with your dog?" Sally demanded. "You're just like a dog, yourself. You've got no more shame than a dog. Might as well sleep like a dog."

"I wouldn't talk about sleep if I were in your place," said Tim. "You're a horrid sloth yourself."

"I'm not going to talk about sleep," answered Sally. "I'm going to do it. Keep your damn socks on and your great mouth shut. Good-night!"

"Sweet woman," observed Tim Willows as he watched, with a feeling of defeat, his wife curl herself up in bed.

"Miserable little man," she murmured, and that was the last word. It was all Sally's.

Mr. Ram, however, won the last trick.

The slumber of his happily married couple was troubled that night by strangely realistic dreams. Vague and intangible figures seemed to be flitting noiselessly about the room. There was much peering into faces, and Tim got the impression that his body was being critically inspected. Sally later admitted that she had experienced the same feeling. And through all these dreams and dim imaginings the figure of Mr. Ram was inextricably woven. The little man had grown to full stature and appeared to be directing the activities of the other figures that peopled the darkness. Occasionally he would pause to exchange a few words with a group of Egyptian friends and at such times Tim distinctly saw Mr. Ram's white teeth bared in a malicious smile. Once or twice when the god glanced over at the twin beds Tim could have sworn he heard a subdued chuckle. Then amazingly the figures melted away and in his dream Tim saw Mr. Ram returning to his former size on the bookcase. It was all disturbingly vague and confusing. So much so, in fact, that Sally for the first time in her life woke up before her husband and immediately appropriated the bathroom, knowing full well that this would irritate him beyond measure and precipitate a morning row.

A few minutes later the sound of running water brought Tim back to consciousness. He sat up with a start, glanced

suspiciously at the figure of Mr. Ram, who seemed to have changed his position during the night, then promptly rolled out of bed. Stripping off his shirt he stood before a pier-glass mirror to ascertain if his body was as ill-favored as Sally so eloquently made it out to be. The moment he did so he received a decided shock. In some manner unknown to him his wife had managed to get to the mirror first. He had not seen her do it, yet nevertheless there she was, standing in front of him and cutting off his view of himself.

"Please get out of the way," he told her irritably. "I can't see a thing of myself. And, furthermore, you're a nice person to be talking about nakedness. Here you are flaunting yourself totally nude in front of this mirror. You should be ashamed."

He was surprised at the sound of his own voice. It was unnaturally soft and had a distinctly feminine quality in it. He cleared his throat and tried again.

"Go on out of here," he said. "I've got to get to my office."

The woman seemed to be mocking him silently. Every time he opened his mouth to speak she very cleverly mimicked the movements of his lips.

"How childish of you," Tim exclaimed, and was petrified on the spot by a wild cry issuing from the bathroom.

"What the hell!" began Mr. Willows, then said no more.

A figure looking strangely like himself came dashing out of the bathroom as if pursued by all the devils in hell.

"Oh, look!" chattered the figure in a voice reminiscent of his wife's.

Tim looked incredulously at the figure before him, then quickly surveyed his own body. The sight that met his eyes almost unhinged his reason.

"My God!" he gasped. "Oh, my God! What has happened to us, or are we both going mad?"

"Oh-h-h, I don't know," breathed the other. "It all seems terrible to me. Here I stand talking to myself and yet I am you—you to the last detail. I can't stand it, I tell you, I can't stand it."

"Well, I suppose you think I'm tickled to death to be oc-

cupying your body," said Tim. "How do you fancy I feel?"

She looked ruefully at the body of which she had been so mysteriously deprived, and her heart sank.

"I had such a beautiful figure," she murmured. "And now you've got it. I suppose you'll put that silly-looking shirt on it when you go to bed at night?"

"No," replied Tim triumphantly, "I'm going to wear your best and most expensive night dresses."

"What!" exclaimed Sally. "You're going to start in wearing my clothes?"

"Naturally," replied Tim. "Do you want me to make your body look ridiculous? You don't seem to realize that in the eyes of the world I am you."

Tim was treated to the unnerving experience of seeing his own body wringing its hands.

"Oh, this is just terrible," moaned Sally. "It's the worst thing that ever happened. You won't know how to wear anything and you'll make me look all sloppy and probably end up by becoming a loose woman."

Tim laughed hatefully.

"You know what I'm going to do?" he asked. "I'm going to torture Carl Bentley. I think he deserves it."

"You leave that man alone," cried Sally furiously. "Keep your hands off him and be careful what you do with my body. First thing you know you'll be presenting me with a nameless child. I could never bear that."

This thought sobered Tim Willows. He was truly in an extremely precarious position. Once he had been able to take his chances with the best of them, but now if he slipped from the path of virtue he would have to be continually worrying about the consequences. This was a most disagreeable realization. It wasn't fair. What a devil of a thing to have happened to a full-grown man! And how the devil could it have happened? Tim very much wanted his body back.

"You won't have to bear it," he said slowly. "I'd have to bear it. Wouldn't that be awful?"

"I don't see why," replied Sally. "I think it would be just dandy. It would teach you what women have to go through

in this world. Please put something on my body and try to hold it a little better. I can't stand seeing the poor thing the way it is."

She passed Tim her abandoned night dress and that shrinking creature allowed it to be draped over his nakedness. The ordeal proved too much for him. He sank down on the bed and refused to meet his wife's eyes.

"I've never been so ashamed of myself in all my life," he murmured. "To think of me in this." He plucked at the diaphanous material with nervous fingers. "In this of all things."

"You're the living image of myself," said Sally, sitting down beside him and slipping an arm round his waist. "You certainly are a sweet little thing. I think you're about the most attractive woman I've seen in years."

"Take your arm away from me," gasped Tim in a strangled voice. "And for God's sake, don't be common. I'll stand for no monkey business. The sooner you know that the better."

He sprang to his feet and stood looking down at himself with outraged eyes. Then something occurred that humiliated him to the very depth of his being. Sally picked him up in her arms and tossed him back on the bed.

"I'll settle your hash later," she said, and swaggered over to the mirror. After gazing into it for a moment she turned to the rumpled figure on the bed. "This vapid face of yours needs a shave terribly. What are we going to do about that?"

"Don't give a damn what you do about it," came gloomily from the bed. "You can cut the face to ribbons if you like. It isn't any good to me any more."

"Well, as bad as it is," replied Sally, "it's the only face I have and I'm certainly not going to allow whiskers to grow all over it."

"I wish you'd stop talking about my face as if it were a mere thing," Tim almost sobbed. "It was always a good face to me. If you don't take care of it I'll make such a fright of yours that babies will have convulsions and mothers will pass out the moment they clap eyes on me. You'll hear people saying, 'that hideous Willows woman.' "

"You'd never do a thing like that," said Sally in a shocked voice. "I'll hang this body of yours in the attic."

"I will if you're not mighty good to my face," replied Tim, "and put in a new blade."

"Oh, I'll be good to your face," promised Sally. "I'm going to try to improve it. God knows there's enough room."

Tim sat suddenly up in the bed and looked at his watch on the night table.

"Cripes!" he exclaimed. "You'll be late at the office. Hurry up and get dressed."

"What! Me go to your office?" Tim's former face was starched with amazement.

"Who else?" he demanded. "I can't go. You've got to carry on. We can't starve, you know."

"Do you mean that I actually have to go to work, catch trains, and be on time and all that?"

"Certainly," replied Tim, beginning to enjoy the situation.

"But, Tim," protested Sally, "I don't know the first thing about it. I've never written a word of copy and I won't even know the people at the office."

"You'll catch on quickly enough," said Tim reassuringly. "Luckily I'm working on a chain of women's shops at present. You'll probably be able to write that copy a whole lot better than I could. And just pretend you know everybody. Be particularly nice to the girl at the desk and also to Dolly Meades. They're pals of mine. Also Steve Jones."

"How pally are you with the two women?" asked Sally.

"Not consummated," said Tim briefly.

"Then I'll consummate," replied Sally.

"Lucky dog," observed Tim. "And they'll blame it all on me."

"But it is you," said Sally. "I'm only inside."

"Yes," remarked Tim moodily, "and the trouble is you haven't any gentlemanly instincts. You'll do the first woman dirt who comes your way."

"You shouldn't be so irresistibly attractive," explained Sally. "It won't be my fault."

"I have always exercised remarkable self-control," Tim told her. "And that's more than you will do."

"I'm exercising it right now," said Sally, looking darkly at the figure on the bed. "I've a good mind to have my will with you, young lady."

"Don't!" pleaded Tim. "Don't! Even in fun it's too much."

"So that's what you think of yourself," said the other with a sneer. "Do you wonder I've been revolted?"

"I'm all right," replied Tim. "Only thing is, I haven't gotten used to being you yet, that's all."

"Then you'd better make it snappy," replied Sally. "Remember, from now on, I am the dominant male."

But by the time Sally had got herself shaved and dressed she no longer felt quite so dominant. Her mind was full of misgivings. She was loath to face the world alone.

"I just can't go to your office," she protested, sinking down in a chair. "I won't know what to do or what to say or anything. I'll just be a mess."

"But that's what you've been claiming all along you wanted," replied Tim gloatingly. "Every night of your life you've kept dinning in my ears how much you'd like to change places with me. Well, now you've got your wish. Make the most of it."

"Tim," said Sally in an awed voice, "that must be it. We've kept wishing to change places with each other so long that someone has granted our wish. Only they've let us retain our personalities so we'll know exactly what's happened. Wonder who could have done this thing?"

"I rather suspect Mr. Ram," Tim replied slowly. "There's a funny look about him this morning and I seem to remember having met him in my dreams last night."

"So do I," exclaimed Sally. "I recall him now quite distinctly."

For the first time since they had owned him Mr. Ram refused to meet their gaze. His position was changed so that he now stood looking innocently out of the window at the house across the way.

"I guess we had it coming to us," remarked Tim. "God knows you wished it often enough."

"Who wouldn't," said Sally, "if they had to live with a creature like you?"

"Go on, get to your office," answered Tim, crawling back into bed. "I'm going to have a nice, lazy drowse. And by the way, you'd better try to do something about your voice. You sound awfully ladylike. Speak from your chest like I do."

"But you shouldn't speak from your chest."

"Then I'll practice feminine elocution while you work hard at the office," Tim replied, yawning lazily.

Sally stamped over to the bed and stood there looking down at him.

"Do you mean to say," she demanded, "that you're going to lie there in that bed and let me go out to work for you, you worm?"

"Why not?" inquired Tim. "Isn't that just exactly what I did?"

"And you're not even enough of a gentleman to drive me down to the station?" she continued.

"Certainly not," replied Tim smilingly. "I'm not supposed to be a gentleman. You never drove me down. You've changed places with me and got exactly what you've been asking for—now make the best of it."

"Then do you know what I'm going to do?" she demanded in a voice cold with fury. "I'm going to give you a baby and I hope it's twins. You just wait and see if I don't."

"I won't be the mother of your children if I have to hang myself," declared Tim. "I'll jump in the river first."

Sally paused at the door. She was laughing to herself.

"Then you'll have to do one or the other," she told him, "because I'm going to do you in. You just wait."

"Get to your office," shouted Tim, white with anger. "And I won't be here when you get back. Remember that."

"Good!" exclaimed Sally. "I'll call up one of your conquests and get her to come over."

"And I'll divorce you flat," threatened Tim. "I'll drag your name through the mud."

"It's your own name you'll be dragging," said Sally. "Don't forget that." She paused and blew him a kiss. "See you later, cutie."

The howl of a maddened animal followed her down the hall.

The terrible sound died away and the person who had once been Tim Willows lay chattering on the bed. He was not going to be a mother. He was dead sure of that.

"Damn you, Ram," he muttered. "You dog-faced Egyptian crook."

Chapter VI. Tim Tries to Be a Lady

AFTER THE DEPARTURE OF SALLY IN WHAT HAD RECENTLY BEEN his body Tim Willows found himself unable to enjoy that nice lazy drowse he had anticipated. He could not even entertain the idea. He got out of bed and forced himself to a shrinking inspection of his newly acquired anatomy.

"If I know anything at all about women," he decided at last, "I certainly am one. There's no getting away from the fact. And the worst of it is I'm supposed to act like a woman. If I fail to act like a woman I'll be disgracing my own name. Too bad I'm so blastedly forgetful. I'm sure to break out at some critical moment and make a mess of it all."

This line of thought naturally brought him to the problem of his voice. At present it sounded like a voice that was still undecided whether to become a grunt or a squeak. It was neither one thing nor the other, being too deep for a woman's and too high for a man's. Sitting on the edge of his bed he industriously practised the art of vocal elevation.

"This is about the silliest thing I've ever done," he observed moodily to himself as he listened critically to the peculiar sounds issuing from his lips.

"Good-afternoon, my dear," he heard himself saying. "What a perfectly sweet dress! It's just simply too attractive. Isn't the weather foul? I loathe foul weather. Simply loathe it! It makes one feel so—so lousy. Oh, hell," he broke off, his voice dropping several degrees, "it's no good. I could never go through with it. Suppose they ask me things, fiendishly personal things? I know women do it. They always do. They have to. It's their specialty."

He shrank within himself and stared bleakly at Mr. Ram, who steadfastly avoided his gaze.

"Wonder if she meant what she said," Mr. Willows continued to muse, his thoughts once more reverting to his wife's parting threat. "Wouldn't put it past her. She's like that. It would tickle her pink to do it. Gad, what a fix I'm in—no knowledge of female wiles."

He went to the bathroom and made a great to-do about water and soap.

"Don't have to shave," he observed, critically surveying his wife's pert face in the mirror. "That's one good thing at least, but I do have to make up a little and arrange my hair some way. How does one manage that?"

But manage it he did. Sighing deeply, he returned to the bedroom and began to rummage through his wife's bureau. A black piece of lace network caught his eye and he became idly interested.

"Guess I'll put this on," he muttered.

For five minutes he sweated over the delicate fastenings of the brassière, then, admitting himself baffled, he compromised by putting it on backwards. He had not the courage to bring himself to look at the result. After that, he went slinking about the room, furtively getting himself into this thing and that until finally he was fully if not any too securely arrayed. The garters had been a struggle. These, too, he put on backwards and dragged the straps round to the front. This weird arrangement made him feel rather peculiar and uncertain about the waist and upper legs, but he decided it was better than wearing no garters at all. By the time he had finished with himself, virtually every article of wearing apparel his wife had possessed was scattered about the room. Then with a deep sigh he seated himself at the vanity dresser and proceeded to do things to his face.

"I never thought she did this thing right," he said to himself. "Think I'll make a good job of it and make her feel envious when she comes home to-night."

But by the time he had finished with lipsticks and eyebrow pencils and mascara and rouge, there were few women in the

world who would have envied him his face. The lipstick was the first difficulty. In endeavoring to achieve a symmetrical and well-balanced effect, he kept adding color first to one side of his lips and then to another, until at last even he himself grew alarmed at the size his mouth was becoming. Abandoning this feature of his face as hopeless, he applied himself to his eyelashes, with decidedly streaky results which did not add to the neatness of his already untidy face. He then penciled his eyebrows heavily, unevenly, and, being of an experimental nature, curled them up at the ends.

"The exotic touch," he murmured. "I've always been strongly attracted to exotic-looking women. I'll make an exotic face of it."

However, instead of making his face look exotic, as he fondly believed he was doing, he merely succeeded in making it look chaotic. To be truthful it was about the most chaotic-looking face that had ever been worn by a human being. This became even more apparent after he had liberally applied rouge to his cheeks and sprinkled several beauty spots in what he considered to be appropriate places.

"Must have earrings," he muttered, now thoroughly engrossed in his artistic endeavors. "Got to have earrings and a sort of necklace thing."

After emptying several small boxes of their contents, he found what he wanted and thus further adorned his person. With the earrings he experienced some difficulty, but was finally able to make them stay put. These last embellishments gave to his already miscellaneous appearance the suggestion of a frivolous but slightly smeared gypsy fortune teller. The general effect was exceedingly confusing. In his absorption in the decoration of his features, Tim Willows had overlooked the point that he was creating a face that was supposed to be worn in a civilized community. If seen at a masquerade at about five o'clock in the morning when everyone's faculties were numbed by over-indulgence, it might possibly have got by, but in a quiet suburban home it was a most astounding face to come upon unexpectedly.

Certainly Mrs. Jennings found it so when Tim, still fum-

bling with his rebellious garters, descended the stairs and made a rather crablike entrance into the lounge. Tim was no less astounded. To his memory he had never seen this person before. He did not want to see her now. And the look he directed upon her eloquently expressed his feelings.

"Oh, my dear," began Mrs. Jennings, "whatever has happened to your face?"

"Nothing that I know of, madam," replied Tim with deep-voiced dignity. "Is my face in need of a shave or are you under the impression that the thing has slipped?"

Suddenly remembering that this was not at all the sort of answer that was expected of him, he laughed a trifle hysterically, then attempted to look coy.

"I'm practising a part in a play," he told the almost stupefied woman. "Don't know when it's going to be, but it's going to be—that is, I think it is. The part calls for a deep-voiced woman. Don't ask me why. It just does. Did you ever practise being a deep-voiced woman? It's most remarkable what one can do. You should try being deep-voiced, my dear. Really you should. Just excuse me a minute. Be right back."

Tim hurried to the dining room and, opening a closet in the sideboard, extracted a bottle of rye, from which he drank deeply without even troubling about a glass. Wiping the tears from his eyes together with much mascara, he rang for Peter, and returned coughingly to the lounge once more to confront Mrs. Jennings.

Mrs. Jennings, it developed after much astute fishing, was a neighbor who on the pretext of borrowing a meat grinder had dropped over to exchange a lot of dirt. She was young, attractive, and in every respect desirable, but, handicapped as he was with his present body, Tim did not know what on earth to do with the woman.

"Well, you certainly should have been an actress," Mrs. Jennings observed. "When you first came into the room, I could have sworn a man was speaking. Thought perhaps it was your husband, although I've never met him. Only this morning Jack was saying to me, 'Flo,' he said, 'I want you to meet Tim Willows. He's one of the few interesting men in Cliffside.' "

This last declaration of Mrs. Jennings was a great help to Tim Willows. It enabled him to discover that the woman called herself Flo, and by the process of elimination, he decided that her last name could be none other than Jennings. Feeling a little better equipped to continue this unequal contest, he was about to reply to the woman when one of his earrings became detached and slipped down the front of his dress.

"Damn these earrings to hell!" he exclaimed gruffly but sincerely. "Why don't they stay where they belong?"

Snatching irritably at the neck of the dress, he succeeded not only in unfastening his brassière, but also in ripping open the dress itself. As a result of this, he was almost naked to the waist.

At that moment Peter presented himself in answer to the bell. As Tim turned towards him, that venerable domestic was startled beyond measure. Tim, noticing the old man's embarrassment, hastened to put him at his ease.

"Pardon me, Peter," he said girlishly. "Just a slight accident. You can serve breakfast now."

"Yesem," replied Peter, hurrying from the room and thinking strange thoughts to himself in his flight.

"Of course, you'll stay to breakfast, Flo, dear," continued the spurious Sally. "At least have a cup of coffee."

Flo Jennings stayed. She wanted to talk about Beth Johnson's operation and she intended to talk about Beth Johnson's operation. Nothing was going to stop her. She hoped to be able to talk about that operation for a long time and in great detail.

Meanwhile, out in the kitchen, Mr. Peter Twill was endeavoring to relieve his feelings through the unsatisfactory medium of words.

"All she needs is feathers to make her look like a red Indian," he informed his good wife. "Painted wild like a heathen savage and nearly as naked. Doesn't seem to mind. 'Pardon me, Peter,' she said, as cool as ice, just like it was the most natural thing in the world for a woman to be going about that way. Something's come over her and the master, too. He gave me the coyest look this morning when he asked for a little pick-

me-up. Then he said—and very nastily, too—that a woman's place was in the home, but that instead of having a woman we had a lazy bum in bed. He never went as far as that about Miss Sally before."

Dopey, gathering from the excited voice of Peter that rare and interesting developments were afoot, oozily emerged from his box and, pushing open the pantry door, presented himself in the dining room. The sight of his dog caused Tim once more to forget that he was a lady.

"Come here, you old son of a hooker," he called out in a rough, vulgar voice to the confusion of Flo Jennings. "How's every little thing?"

At the sound of his master's voice issuing from his mistress's body, Dopey stopped dead in his tracks and with reproachful eyes gazed at the speaker. One look at the face sent the hair up along the dog's spine. There was something wrong here, something radically wrong with that face. God knows what it all meant. Unable to trust his legs, Dopey sat down and broke into a gentle sweat.

"Come here, damn your craven heart to hell," grated the painted woman.

The dog could stand it no longer. He elevated his muzzle and pushed through it a howl of sheer bewilderment and mental anguish, then, turning, the great beast endeavored to crawl away on his stomach. The howl of the dog had already disconcerted Flo Jennings, but that which issued from the madly painted lips of her hostess froze the poor woman in her chair. Already Tim Willows had been through a sufficiently trying morning. He had stood enough for ten men. In the face of overwhelming odds he had done his best to be a lady. It was as if fate had conspired to defeat his efforts. His garters were all wrong and his breasts refused to work. Then this Jennings woman had greatly added to the difficulties of the situation. These things had he stood with fortitude. Even with the threat of motherhood hanging over his head, he had tried to remain calm, but when his own dog turned tail and denied him, Tim Willows went temporarily mad. With a howl even less agreeable to hear than his dog's, Tim sprang from the

table and hurled the nearest glass at the busily slithering body. Dopey, still close to the floor, gasped and, looking back over his shoulder with despairing eyes, gave himself up for lost. Then Mr. Willows heaped upon the head of the animal a flood of vile abuse in which he brought to light every defect in the creature's character and every crime he had ever committed. Dopey longed to put his paws to his ears if only to muffle this horrid impeachment, but he was too busy scraping with them on the kitchen door to interrupt his frantic efforts. Succeeding at last in opening this he sneaked from the room.

"No wonder the poor thing is terrified," said Mrs. Twill to her husband. "Hear her swear. Why she's just like a man, she is. Worse."

"Something strange has come over this house," old Peter replied, with heavy assurance.

Dopey fully agreed as he collapsed into his box, where he lay shivering fitfully.

Back in the dining room Tim was trying to pull himself together.

"It's my temperament, you know," he explained, bestowing a smile of suffering upon his unwelcome companion. "I get this way when I act—lose myself in the part—forget at times who I am. What were you saying, my dear? Something awfully interesting. It was all about Beth Johnson and a lot of knives and blood."

Flo Jennings, vainly trying to understand what had come over Sally Willows, soon lost herself in the ghastly narration of Beth Johnson's operation. Tim, listening with shrinking ears, struggled as best he could to choke down the bacon and eggs which Peter had timidly set before him. The woman went into the most revolting details and dwelt gloatingly on the pain inflicted on what had hitherto been for Tim unheard-of organs of the body. With mounting consternation he wondered if he had all those organs inside him, and if he had, were they all okay. And all the time he was thinking to himself, "Why, this woman is no better than a ghoul—a horrid vulture. And they say men are crude, evil-speaking creatures.

This Jennings person here has the worst of us licked. Wonder if she drinks blood instead of orange juice for breakfast?"

When Flo lightly passed on to the subject of cancerous growths and their prevalence among women Tim was reduced to the consistence of a submerged sponge. Rising unsteadily from the table he excused himself for a moment, with a feeble smile of apology. In the kitchen he seized Peter with shaking hands.

"Sneak that bottle out of the sideboard," he told the old gentleman, who was himself beginning to shake. "That woman in there is killing me."

Peter returned with the bottle, and Tim poured himself a stiff bracer.

"Take one yourself," he told Peter, "and give one to Judy. We all need a little something to-day."

When he had returned to the dining room Mrs. Twill turned to her husband with frightened eyes.

"Sounds exactly like Mr. Tim," she said, "and doesn't look much like Miss Sally."

Peter nodded in silence and swallowed down his rye.

Tim led his guest to the lounge, where he absently selected a cigar from the humidor. After carefully lighting the cigar he politely offered one to the woman, who was looking at him with a peculiar expression.

"I've never smoked a cigar in my life," said Mrs. Jennings in declining the offer.

"Oh, you should, my dear," Tim replied with false sweetness. "George Sand did, and in Germany it's all the rage among smart women. We'll all be doing it soon. That, by the way, is who I'm supposed to be—George Sand. I've just remembered. Famous writer. Lived with a lot of men. All different."

Flo hesitated. She dearly wanted to be a smart woman.

"I might try," she said at last. "Now that there are no men about to see. Hope it doesn't make me sick."

"What a silly Flo you are," scoffed Tim as, with grim satisfaction, he selected the blackest cigar he could find and lighted it for the unsuspecting woman.

"You know," said Flo Jennings after she had finished

coughing, "what I really came over here for was to borrow your meat grinder."

"That's just what she would borrow," said Tim to himself. "She and a meat grinder should get along splendidly together." Aloud he remarked graciously, "Certainly, Flo. I'd be delighted. What sort of meat are you going to mutilate?"

"Roast beef," replied Flo, struggling with the cigar.

"I'll bet it's nice and rare," said Tim.

"It is," replied Flo with gleaming eyes. "I like it rare."

Tim shuddered and left the room. He was sorry for the roast beef. While getting the grinder he helped himself to another drink, then returned to the lounge. He found Flo Jennings looking very pale and wan. The sight gave him no little satisfaction.

"I think I'll be going," she said weakly. "This cigar seems to have done things to me. Don't feel as if I could ever eat again. Do run over to see me, Sally. It's been such a lovely chat."

"Hasn't it just?" replied Tim. "It was really too simply sweet of you to have let me in on Beth Johnson's operation. Try to dig up another one."

Flo was too far gone to be aware of the irony in Tim's words. She seized the grinder and made a hasty exit. Tim sank down in a chair and broodingly considered his breasts.

That afternoon, a trifle exalted, Tim took a walk, and in his reckless frame of mind allowed himself to be picked up by a couple of passing automobilists. When the machine turned down an unfrequented road and his companions attempted to become forcibly familiar, Tim's immediate reactions both pained and surprised them. Seizing a spanner from the floor of the car he knocked one of the gentlemen out, then incapacitated the other with a well-directed kick. Realizing he was no longer welcome he got out of the car and trudged off down the road. It was five miles to home, and Tim, in his light, high-heeled pumps, felt hardly equal to the task.

"To think that such a thing should ever have happened to me," he mused bitterly. "What a good girl doesn't have to stand for in this world! I'm a damn good girl, myself, but it

strikes me that no girl's honor is worth a five-mile walk. On a good road it might be, and in the summer, but not on a road like this."

Thus moralizing, Tim continued to plod through the slush and the gathering dusk. Behind him on the road two stricken automobilists were examining the extent of their injuries and radically revising their opinions of the weaker sex.

Gradually Tim began to chuckle.

"I certainly did that beggar dirt," he muttered. "He'll never be any earthly good. Serves him damn well right for trying to get rough with a lady. Hope the other one isn't dead. Anyway I've still got my honor—whatever that is."

Chapter VII. A Man in Body Only

WHILE TIM WILLOWS WAS HAVING HIS DAY, SUCH AS IT WAS, Sally was also having hers in full measure. The poor girl was doing her best to be a gentleman. In this she succeeded only spottily. There were moments when she was quite good and others when she was very poor indeed. Her trip into town, for instance, was most unfortunate. Especially for Mr. Carl Bentley.

Sally should never have taken that pick-me-up from old Peter. It did more harm than good. Dashed down as it had been on an empty stomach it seemed only to make her disinclined to remember for any length of time the reversed position she was now so amazingly occupying. She preferred to be herself.

And, of course, she should never have sat down in the train beside Mr. Carl Bentley. This was a mistake. Almost anyone who sat down beside that insufferably boring gentleman anywhere was making a mistake, as was very speedily and painfully realized, but for Sally, in her mood of reckless elevation, the mistake could easily have proved disastrous. As it was, the young lady in her excited condition completely lost both poise and perception, and for an apparently case-hardened

commuter conducted herself completely unlike the accepted conception of that unblessed creature.

Carl Bentley himself did a little long-distance poise-losing. The moment he became aware of the fact that he was going to have as a seat-mate the man who of all men he most desired to avoid, he became demoralized in all departments. Turning slightly he viewed with alarm the features of the bogus Mr. Willows. Carl's temerity was rewarded by a smile of infinite tenderness as he looked for a startled moment into his companion's brimming eyes.

"Good-morning, dear," fell lightly from the other's lips.

Mr. Bentley started and then tried to convince himself that he had both heard and seen wrong. He fervently hoped he had. If Tim Willows wanted to be friendly, so much the better, but there was no need for him to be gushing about it. Mr. Bentley felt called upon to make some sort of reply.

"We seem fated to be thrown together," he observed a little resentfully as, with great ostentation, he unfolded his morning paper.

"Lucky fate!" exclaimed Sally with a rush. "You great big beautiful man."

Carl Bentley blushed to the roots of his hair even while his blood ran cold. This is an extremely unusual feat and very difficult to do. But Carl Bentley, so great was his perturbation, achieved it with remarkable ease.

"I said," continued the voice, this time a little louder, "you great big beautiful man."

"Don't keep on saying it," Mr. Bentley pleaded earnestly. "People might begin to talk."

With this he plunged his head in his paper and gave himself up to bitter thoughts. Was this man put on earth merely to torture him? Just because he, Bentley, had tried to dishonor the creature's home, was that sufficient reason for carrying the feud into public life? Funny thing, too, he had never noticed before that Tim Willows had such a shockingly effeminate voice. It was either that or else the man was displaying the worst of bad taste in trying to be funny in such a questionable manner.

"What do I care how people talk?" he heard his companion proclaiming. "What do we care? For the first time in my life I am enjoying complete sexual freedom. I recognize no barriers."

Sally was beginning to enjoy the situation hugely. All women are born with a well-developed desire to make men feel uncomfortable whenever possible. This retaliatory impulse compensates them in part for the long years of oppression heaped upon them by the self-satisfied male. It gave Sally infinite delight to make this large man squirm. And this feeling did not at all conflict with the fact that at the same time she found him passably attractive. For this reason her conversation was half in earnest and half in play, a most unfortunate combination for the peace of mind of Carl Bentley.

"Perfect sexual freedom," she repeated defiantly. "Sex without let or hindrance. Everything! All!"

Carl Bentley shivered.

"Practice your freedom with someone else," he told her in a low, hurried voice. "Don't try to drag me down with you. I wish for neither everything nor all!"

"You're right," continued Sally resolutely. "It's time we stood back to back and faced the world—threw our love in its ugly snoot. Why should we hide our guilty secret? I fear nothing, sweetheart, with you at my side."

"I fear everything with you at my side," groaned Mr Bentley. "Won't you go away from it?"

"All the seats are taken. All the seats are taken," sang Sally in a happy voice. "It's just as you said, Carl, dear. Fate has conspired to keep us inseparable."

It was remarkable how uncannily the man could imitate his wife's voice. It was terrible. Carl Bentley looked furtively about him and was convinced that his eyes encountered the amused and scornful glances of his fellow commuters. In particular he noticed a pretty stenographer who was looking at him in a most peculiar way. Then, for the first time, he realized that the heavy fragrance he had been smelling ever since he had boarded the train emanated from his companion. It was true. While shifting into her husband's clothes Sally had

been unable to resist spraying on herself a dash of her favorite perfume. It had been an instinctive action, a long-established habit, but Carl Bentley did not take this into consideration. He was very much upset.

"Why in heaven's name did you put that stuff on you?" he demanded. "You smell like the loosest of women. People will begin to suspect me."

"Let 'em suspect," retorted Sally. "Why shouldn't I perfume my body? I'll anoint the damn thing with oils if I want to. I tell you I'm free—free!"

She tried to fling an arm round his neck, and for a moment they struggled unbecomingly together, to the delight of several spectators.

"I want to hug you," gritted Sally through her husband's teeth as she struggled manfully back. "Come on, handsome. Let me give you a hug."

In the small turmoil arising from Sally's amorous efforts she succeeded in yanking Mr. Bentley's tie out from under his vest and in completely upsetting his carefully arranged hair. The man was in a pitiful condition, almost on the verge of collapse. Sally might have felt sorry for him had it not been for the fact that the drink was dying on her, and she could feel sorry only for herself. Recklessly she tossed discretion to the winds.

"You weren't so backward the other night," she flung at the discomfited Mr. Bentley as he struggled to rearrange himself. "You were only too anxious then to have me put my arms round your neck. Don't try to deny it. You've been after me for weeks."

"What!" gasped the stricken man. "Me after you? Are you mad or am I?"

He slumped down in the seat and buried his head in the newspaper.

"I'm mad about you," he heard the soft voice say as its owner slipped affectionately down beside him and made a snatch at one of his hands. Then he became horribly aware of the conductor looking down at them both with ill-concealed distaste. What was the man thinking? Probably the worst.

Sally seemed to be the first to recover her poise. She realized that here was a situation in which she might as well act as a man.

"Hello, there," she said in the voice of Mr. Willows, thereby driving Bentley into even greater confusion. "How are you to-day, officer? Meet my boy friend."

The conductor punched the extended commutation ticket, then transferred his attention to Carl Bentley, and to that gentleman's horror addressed him in a ladylike voice.

"Will you please show me your ticket, miss?" said the conductor to Carl Bentley. "I hope you won't think me bold."

Mr. Bentley guiltily held up his ticket with a trembling hand, and so great was the power of suggestion that when he tried to answer the man his voice cracked on a high note and he was forced to abandon the attempt. Well pleased with the success of his humor, for Sally had laughed heartily and deeply at the conductor's words, the man passed on and, bending low over the passenger in the next seat, whispered a few sentences, then chuckled coarsely. Mr. Bentley felt sure the man must be pointing at him. He sank even lower down in the seat and became completely hidden by his paper.

"You've ruined me," he muttered. "I'll never be able to live this down. It was a sad day when I first laid eyes on your wife."

"Oh," replied Sally, lapsing into her feminine way of speaking. "Well, I'll try to make it up to you for her."

Bentley made no reply to this, and for several blessed minutes he was allowed to read his paper in quiet if not in peace. His respite was short-lived. From the tail of his eye he presently made out the face of Tim Willows peeking coyly round the edge of the paper. Then the face giggled and spoke and a long finger pointed at an advertisement.

"How'd you like to see me in those step-ins?" asked the face. "Wouldn't I look cute?"

Carl Bentley shrank back, nearly overcome by his emotions.

"Wouldn't I?" persisted the face. "Tell me, Carl, or I'll make a scene."

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Bentley. "This is too much. This time you've gone too far—overstepped all bounds."

He tried to rise, but Sally clung desperately to the tails of his coat. Mr. Bentley, as he sank back, decided that this was one of life's most embarrassing moments. People were looking at him, going out of their way to look at him. They were bending out into the aisle, peering over the backs of seats.

"Say yes," continued the hateful voice. "If you don't I'll break into tears. I'll sob. I'll moan. I'll growl."

The thought of occupying a seat with a sobbing, moaning, growling Tim Willows completely cowed Carl Bentley. He would submit to any form of torture rather than have that occur.

"You would," he managed to get out, nearly sobbing, himself. "You'd look just dandy. Here, you take this paper and read it to yourself."

"You're so sweet," murmured Sally. "But I already have a paper."

"Then for God's sake read it," snapped the baited Mr. Bentley. "Do you intend to drive me mad?"

Sally burst into a fresh, girlish laugh.

"Now you're joshing me," she said, slapping him playfully on the cheek with her husband's gloves. "You tried to crawl into my bed the other night, didn't you? What a bad, bold man you are."

Bentley gathered himself for action, then, before Sally had time to realize what he intended to do, he sprang from the seat and sped down the aisle. For a moment she looked after him, then she, too, sprang up and hurried in pursuit, implor-ingly calling his name. Sometimes she called him by both names as if to make sure that the whole trainload of commuters should know all about Carl Bentley. She was still dogging his footsteps when the train pulled in at the station. Bentley was the first to alight, and as his feet hit the long ramp they instinctively started to run. So did Sally's. The man fled through the gate to the huge waiting room and streaked across the floor. For a time Sally hung on, then decided it was hardly worth while. The last Mr. Bentley heard of the voice that had

made him an outcast among men was, "Good-bye, dearie. Don't do anything I wouldn't do myself." This parting shot lent speed to his already flying feet.

Sally turned and was immediately disconcerted by the suspicious scrutiny of a policeman. At that moment a man she knew only slightly was so unfortunate as to pass by. Sally slapped him so violently on the back that the cigar he was smoking popped out of his mouth with such speed that for a moment the man thought his assailant had snatched it. Seizing the stunned man's hand Sally pumped it vigorously.

"Hello, Jennings!" she cried in a deep, masculine voice. "How are you, old scout? Well, good-bye."

And with that she swaggered off, leaving the old scout and the policeman feeling that a few words of explanation were due them both.

When she stood before the door of the Nationwide Advertising Agency Sally braced herself and prepared for the worst. She realized that now or never she must act the part of a perfect gentleman. Then Tim's admonition to be nice to the girl at the desk returned to her. She thrust open the door and stood for a moment studying the girl's face. Sally's first glance was sufficient to assure her that few men would find it a difficult task to be nice to this fair creature. She was a luscious specimen of womanhood, fresh and in full bloom. Looking at her Sally gained the impression that the girl was wasting her time most shamefully when not engaged in amorous occupations. She was that type of girl.

"Good-morning, young man," said the girl to Sally. "Why the enraptured gaze?"

"I'm looking at you and running a temperature," replied Sally, in a fair approximation of Tim's voice and manner. "You're such a warm number you make me feverish."

"What!" exclaimed the girl. "At this time of day?"

"Grandpa Willows was just that way," explained Sally. "I've an uncle who's even worse."

Sally thought the responsive glow that sprang to the girl's eyes should be prohibited from public demonstration. It was a menace to mankind.

"All of which, I presume, is leading up to the fact that you'd like your morning spot," said the girl. "Tell me if I'm wrong."

"I have nothing to say," replied Sally.

"Come over here," commanded the girl as she deftly filled a paper cup with a stiff drink from the seemingly inexhaustible flask in the desk drawer. "Toss that off and beat it."

Sally tossed it off, then stood swaying slightly on her feet as the tears streamed from her eyes and strange sounds emerged from her throat.

"Very old and rare," she gasped. "The person who drinks that should never suffer from baldness of the chest."

"I don't suffer from that disease," the girl replied. "I glory in it."

Sally, now invigorated by what she had received, felt truly thankful. She walked back to the desk and, bending down over the girl, neatly kissed her on the mouth, and was surprised to discover that she was more of a man than she had thought possible. In spite of her surprise the girl responded avidly. And this was what Mr. Gibber saw when he arrived at his office that fine, bright morning—his reception clerk being roundly kissed by one of his most troublesome copy writers.

"Mr. Willows!" snapped Mr. Gibber.

"It's himself," muttered the girl.

Sally was surprised at the sound of her own voice, or rather, Tim's voice. It was deep, cool, and collected as she replied to Mr. Gibber.

"One moment, sir," she protested, painfully pressing a thumb into the girl's right eye. "I think I've got it. No, that's odd. It was there a moment ago. Does it hurt much?" This last to the girl.

"Too much," came the feeling reply.

"I'll bet Mr. Gibber's eyes are sharper than mine," Sally announced, straightening her husband's body. "Look, Mr. Gibber, the poor girl's eye is all inflamed. There's a cinder in it or something."

"It's a thumb," said the girl under her breath.

"I'm sorry," replied Mr. Gibber, as he examined the girl's

eye, which by this time was quite convincingly inflamed. "I misunderstood the situation, perhaps. You must be terribly nearsighted, Mr. Willows, or were you trying to bite the cinder out?"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Sally falsely, "you jest, Mr. Gibber, you jest."

Leaving Mr. Gibber with the girl's eye, Sally escaped from the reception room, and after wandering experimentally along various halls and passageways eventually located Tim's office by seeing his name on the door.

No sooner was she seated at the desk than a man walked briskly in and brought a hand down crashingly on her back. Sally pitched forward on Tim's face and lay among the pencils and pads.

"Morning, you sot!" cried the man. "How do you come up and fall off to-day?"

"I fall off," said Sally feebly, "but I don't come up. My good man, you've ruined me."

Sally felt convinced this would be Steve Jones. No other man would take such a chance with Tim. She knew how he objected to back-slapping both in theory and in practice.

"What's wrong with you?" demanded the man. "Are you weak to-day?"

"Very," replied Sally. "Very weak to-day, Steve. Help me to resume the sitting posture you so brutally interrupted."

When Sally was once more erect in her chair she looked at Steve with tears in her eyes. Steve was a likeable enough looking chap—dark, stocky, and with alert black eyes bright with bad thoughts.

"You owe me two dollars," he announced happily. "Gold Heels lost."

"I'd like to check that with Tim," she began, then quickly checked herself and drew two bills from her pocket. "Here's your dishonestly won spoils," she hurried on. "You'll excuse me, I trust, if I seem to dash away? That blow on the back did terrible things to me."

"Double or quits," Steve Jones suggested, flipping a coin in the air.

"What do you mean?" asked Sally, pausing on her way to the door.

"You know," the other replied. "Don't be dumb."

And because Sally did not know she nodded vaguely and, taking a coin from her pocket, flipped it into the waste paper basket.

"Does that win?" she asked hopefully.

"Wait!" cried Steve. "Don't touch it. I'm matching you."

He flipped his coin again, caught it dexterously as Sally watched with admiring eyes a little tinged with envy, flattened the coin on the edge of the desk, then peered greedily down into the waste paper basket.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Good! It's heads. You owe me another two dollars."

Sally's, or rather the face she was wearing, grew blank.

"What?" she demanded. "Already?"

"Don't stall," said Steve, "you big stiff."

"All right," replied Sally. "Seems very strange to me. I'll have to owe it to you. Is that all that we do, or is there more?"

"Not unless you want to double it or nothing," observed Steve.

"Let's play nothing," said Sally. "I really must be going."

As she absently made her way to the ladies' rest room she decided that hereafter she would shun the company of Steve Jones.

"It cost me just four good dollars," she thought to herself, "to get pounded on the back. That's not as it should be."

The ladies' room when she found it was a place of many partitions, which arrangement accounts for the fact that at first the presence of one they had good and sufficient reasons to believe to be a man was not noticed by several girls busily engaged in tightening their stockings upon their well-turned limbs. The conversation of these girls interested Sally and made her still further forget herself. It had to do with the price and quality of stockings and the best places to purchase them. So interested did she become, in fact, that she innocently approached the girls and attempted to join in the conversation.

"My dears," she began in the most friendly of feminine voices, "where do you buy your——"

Her question was neither finished nor answered. Never before had Sally realized that women could work up so much noise at such short notice. The air was pierced by a series of ear-splitting shrieks. Partition doors slammed and the figures of frantic women dashed clutchingly about the room. Sally stood appalled as she saw these figures break for the exit and heard excited voices carrying the name of Mr. Willows to the nethermost recesses of the Nationwide Advertising Agency. It was only a matter of moments before she had the room to herself, or nearly to herself.

"Oh, God, I've done it now," she groaned. "I'll never be able to live after this. What happens next?"

Unable to bear this thought she dragged at a partition door, only to have her efforts rewarded by a fresh outburst of shrieks and lamentations.

"Be quiet!" gasped Sally. "I'm a woman myself at heart."

"Oh, what a liar," came the voice. "You're just a nasty man and you should be ashamed of yourself."

Sally threw open another door, jumped in and snapped the catch just as Miss Reeder, the president's personal secretary, bounced into the room with an expression of set purpose solidifying the wrinkles on her sharp, faded face. At the moment she was in her glory. She was hounding a man. At last she had the goods on one of the members of the sex that had neglected her for so many barren years.

"Mr. Willows," she called in a harsh voice.

"He's not here," said Sally from her place of concealment.

"Oh, he is so," cried the girl in the other compartment. "Make him go away, Miss Reeder."

"I know where he is," replied Miss Reeder complacently. "I can see his big feet. You might as well come out, Mr. Willows."

"I can't come out," said Sally sadly.

"And why not, pray?" demanded Miss Reeder.

"I don't feel like it," replied Sally desperately. "Can't you see I don't feel like it."

Then followed a period of silence which was even more unnerving than the shrieking of many voices.

"Well, Mr. Willows," came the voice of Miss Reeder presently, "are you ready to come out? I'm waiting."

"I'm never coming out," declared Sally.

"Then I'll send some men in," said the determined woman. "They'll break the door down and drag you out."

The prospect of being besieged in a ladies' rest room proved too much for Sally. She opened the door and with great dignity walked past Miss Reeder and out of the room where an informal reception committee was awaiting her arrival. Disdaining any words of explanation Sally averted her gaze from the faces of the interested group and walked slowly back to her husband's office while the eyes of all the stenographers and clerks in the world seemed to be following her progress with hideous concentration. A memorandum was waiting for her on the desk. She picked it up mechanically and read:

Mr. Gibber will continue his talk on Brevity at 10:30 A. M. in the conference room.

Signed: G. M. REEDER, *Sec'y.*

By the time Sally had located the conference room the chairs at the table were nearly all occupied. Sally's belated arrival created no little interest. The distracted girl in man's image was painfully aware of the amused glances of numerous pairs of eyes. Mr. Gibber himself regarded Sally with a stern, censorious eye as she found a chair next to Steve Jones and sank down on it.

"What's the matter?" Steve demanded in a low voice. "Are you turning into a nasty old man or did losing all that money temporarily derange you?"

"Don't ask me now," pleaded Sally. "I can't bear to talk about it yet. Maybe I've gone mad. I don't know."

"Gentlemen," began Mr. Gibber, "yesterday, as you doubtless remember, I was discussing the subject of brevity."

"Yes, sir," put in Dolly Meades helpfully. "You had just gotten to pith."

"I had left pith," replied Mr. Gibber, looking at the young woman reprovingly. "And I do not intend to return to it. In other words, we'll waive pith." He squared his shoulders, then leaning over the table, made a fresh start. "Gentlemen," he said, "do you want to know something?" From the indifferent expressions of the faces of the gentlemen addressed it was only too apparent that they had no desire to know anything.

Sally felt that some answer should be made to Mr. Gibber's neglected question, but as no one seemed to give a hang she answered it herself.

"Yes, Mr. Gibber," she said. "Go right ahead. I'd like to know something."

"What do you want to know?" asked Mr. Gibber suspiciously.

"I haven't the vaguest idea," replied Sally. "Whatever you were going to tell us."

"The question was merely rhetorical," said Mr. Gibber.

"Sorry," answered Sally. "I thought you were speaking on brevity. One can hardly be brief and rhetorical at the same time."

Mr. Gibber's face turned dangerously red and his eyes looked dangerously angry. Nevertheless he got hold of himself and made his third attempt.

"Boys," he called them this time, "this is what I want you to know. It's easy enough to write books, beautiful words. It's as easy as falling off a log. It's a joke. Any one of us here could sit right down now and dash off a novel or a play. We all could do it. And why don't we? I'll tell you—we have more important things to do with our words. I know it, because I have done it. Not a year passes that doesn't see a new book or a play or a sheaf of verse that has been turned out by my pen. Why do I do it?"

"Yes, Mr. Gibber," asked Dolly. "Why do you do it?"

"Just for fun," thundered Mr. Gibber. "Just for a lark. I never even take the trouble to let a publisher have them.

"A business, a man, or an idea that can be put on a paying basis must be fundamentally sound, must be essentially moral. But the vast majority of writers—these poets, playwrights

and novelists—are not on a paying basis. Therefore they are neither sound nor moral. Some of them offend us while others amuse. All very good in their way, but after all, just froth—lightweights. We read them. We use them. We dismiss them. There's no money in that sort of writing. They never get out of the red. Froth." Once more a portentous pause. "Now, boys," he continued, gaining inspiration from the sound of his own voice, "get this fact through your heads: we are the people. It is we who create the literature of progress and plan the campaigns of commerce. Right here in this quiet, gorgeously appointed conference room with my old golf trophies around us and souvenirs of the hunt looking at us from the wall——" Here Mr. Gibber interrupted himself to point at the moth-eaten head of a misanthropic-looking moose gloomily surveying the people.

"He doesn't seem to be tickled to death to see us, that silly-looking old moose doesn't," observed Miss Meades. "What has the moose got to do with this discussion?" demanded Mr. Gibber.

"I don't know, Mr. Gibber," replied Dolly sweetly. "You seemed to be presenting him to us or us to him, so I thought——"

"Don't," broke in Mr. Gibber. "What I was saying, gentlemen, is that right here in this room, moose or no moose, we are the people who are doing the real writing to-day, the real inspired creative work."

"Hear! Hear!" cried Sally enthusiastically. "You're dead right, Mr. Gibber. That's exactly what my husband always tells me. He says that a copy writer must get along on less facts than a writer of fairy tales."

"Your wife you mean, Mr. Willows," corrected Mr. Gibber, highly pleased to be supported from such an unexpected quarter. He forgave Tim Willows much.

"Of course, of course. How foolish of me." Sally's blush spread over her husband's face. "Naturally, my wife."

"Gentlemen," went on Mr. Gibber, plunging his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "It's up to us to write words that sell rather than words that please. And that's hard, gentle-

men, damned hard. That's real writing. I admit it. I have done it. The famous Bingo Reversible Puppy Biscuit Campaign, one of the outstanding successes of modern advertising, was mine, all mine. But it called for work, men, work before words, push before phrase, concentration before copy. That's what I mean. That's what I mean exactly. That and more. We who are gathered here together in the presence of——"

"The moose," suggested Miss Meades.

"—are carrying on a great work," continued Mr. Gibber, brushing interruptions aside, "are shouldering a heavy responsibility. It devolves upon us to protect American capital and American industry from the insidious inroads of the deadly Red Blight. It is up to us to keep American labor contented and where it belongs—obediently on the job. It is my privilege, gentlemen, to be at the head of this splendid organization which I have created. Nay, it is my duty. I must face it. I must face it like an experienced field marshal standing in a—a—a——"

"A field, perhaps," suggested Sally. "That's where he should stand by rights."

"No, not a field," gritted Mr. Gibber.

"In a daze, maybe," put in Dolly Meades, not to be outdone in helpfulness.

"In neither!" cried Mr. Gibber. "Like Marshall Field standing—ha! Where am I? Oh, yes. Like a field marshal standing before the mast, one hand grasping the helm, the other one heaving the lead——"

"A considerable stretch, that, Mr. Gibber," observed the accurate Miss Meades. "Especially for a field marshal who is much more at home on a horse. Now if you had said, 'Like a field marshal clinging to his horse, one hand grasping his tail, the other one holding his tooth——' "

Sally laughed scornfully.

"Do you mean to say that that field marshal's horse had only one tooth?" she demanded.

"No, not necessarily," retorted Dolly Meades hotly. "It might have had two teeth. Then again, it might have been an old horse—a toothless horse."

"They never send a toothless horse to the front," replied Sally.

"Just a minute! Just a minute!" cried Mr. Gibber.

"We've got to settle this, Mr. Gibber," said Dolly Meades. Then, leveling her gaze on Sally, she continued. "Why not?" she demanded truculently. "Why not send a toothless horse to the front? Horses are not supposed to eat the enemy."

"I know," replied Sally. "But it's the looks of the thing I'm thinking about. Not nice to see a lot of toothless horses knocking about the front. Should retire the poor things on half pay."

"I don't see that at all," Miss Meades objected. "If Marshall Field happens to like a toothless horse I see no reason why he shouldn't ride one."

"Who is this Marshall Field, anyway?" asked Sally. "I don't seem to remember him, or is he a place where you play games?"

"I haven't time! I haven't time!" Mr. Gibber protested, looking considerably dazed. "We'll drop Marshall Field——"

"And his toothless horse," added Sally.

"Anyway, you know what I mean," Mr. Gibber struggled on.

"I don't," spoke up Sally unhelpfully, but fortunately for this victim of Mr. Ram's caprice Mr. Gibber did not hear her.

"And there's money in it," he continued. "Good money. Big money. Money enough for us all."

Mr. Gibber pronounced the word "money" so succulently his listeners could almost taste it.

"Not now, perhaps,"—and here Mr. Gibber held up a restraining hand, fearing he had awakened false hopes in the breasts of his listeners. "Not now, of course, but later. For everyone in this room who devotes his entire time, thought, and energy exclusively to the best interests of this great organization there is sure money ahead. I have your welfare at heart. I think you know me well enough to trust your futures to me. Your interests are my interests. Your hopes and aspirations are dearer to me than my own. I am satisfied to be of service to mankind. Only two things do I ask—loyalty and hard work. If you give me those you need have no fear. I will

carry each one of you with me along the highroad of prosperity to a happier and fuller life."

Apparently overcome by the thought of the terrific task he had set himself, Mr. Gibber walked emotionally to a window while his prospective burdens, obviously much depressed, sat and gazed down that highroad where good money, big money, was never now, but forever and forever and for always just a little bit ahead.

Turning abruptly from the window through which he had apparently tossed his emotions, Mr. Gibber once more became his usual brisk, urbane self.

"So that, gentlemen," he clipped out, "is what I mean by brevity. I thank you. Remember!"

"Thank you," spoke up Dolly Meades sweetly. "We'll never forget."

While the conference, feeling rottenly let down, was slothfully disintegrating, Mr. Gibber was earnestly questioning Sally in a far corner of the room.

"How on earth did you manage to do it?" he asked, for Mr. Gibber was sincerely bewildered by the various stories he had heard.

"I didn't try to do it, if that's what you mean," said Sally, equally in earnest. "I didn't sneak in or plan to sneak in or await an opportunity. Can't understand it myself. I was thinking of something—oh, yes—that chain store account. Had a swell idea and just didn't pay any attention to where I was going."

"But I'm told you approached some girls and tried to engage them in conversation," Mr. Gibber continued. "Why did you do that? Why didn't you make haste to leave after you'd discovered where you were?"

This was a very embarrassing question. Sally felt her nerve slipping.

"Still thinking about that chain store account," she answered. "Wanted to get the girls' reactions to a few questions."

"You pick out a somewhat singular place for your investigations, I must say," observed Mr. Gibber.

"No time like the present, I always say," was Sally's lame defense. "And of course legs mean nothing to me. I'm a married woman, Mr. Gibber, like yourself."

"I'm not a married woman," Mr. Gibber stoutly protested.

"Aren't you?" replied Sally, genuinely surprised. "Funny, I always thought you were. Then you must be a merry widow or a divorcee."

Sally smiled at the man archly and his face grew blank with amazement.

"I'm neither," he said at last.

"Then all I can say," replied Sally, "is that you must have a rather peculiar nature."

Mr. Gibber almost swooned at this. His face grew red with indignation and Sally began to fear that his body was going to pop at any minute.

"I tell you, young man," he thundered, "I have no relations with men."

"I can't help that," said Sally calmly. "It's your loss, not mine."

"But I don't want to have relations with men," said Mr. Gibber in a tortured voice.

"All right," replied Sally soothingly. "No one's going to force you. How did we get where we are, anyway?"

"You said you were a married woman," said the badgered Gibber, "and claimed that I was one."

"Oh!" exclaimed Sally, suddenly seeing the dawn. "Of course I meant man. How perfectly absurd!"

"You seem to be having trouble with your genders," said Mr. Gibber, a trifle mollified, but still suspicious.

"My genders?" cried Sally in alarm. "Why, Mr. Gibber! I'm sure I don't know what you mean. Do I show any symptoms of gender disease? Is it fatal, Mr. Gibber?"

"I mean you're getting your sexes mixed," the man explained wearily.

"Oh, that," replied Sally, feeling greatly relieved. "Sex makes no difference to me. Man or woman—all the same. I'm practically sexless myself."

Mr. Gibber received this gratuitous piece of information in a state of stupefaction.

"Listen," he said at last. "I don't want to talk with you. I can't stand it. The things you say revolt me. They do indeed. But I will say this, and you can thank your stars it isn't more serious. Keep out of the ladies' rest room. I feel very sorry for you but more sorry for your wife."

"You should feel sorry for her," replied Sally feelingly. "She's having a tough time of it."

"I'm glad you realize that, at least," said Gibber. "You may go."

Sally went and had a solitary luncheon. The rest of the day she spent rehashing Tim's advertisement of the Ducky Chain Stores, incorporating some ideas of her own. These advertisements were later okayed without a change and Tim Willows's stock as a copy writer continued to rise.

Sally arrived home in time to find Tim tenderly nursing his feet, or rather the feet that had once been hers.

"I got these saving your honor," he growled. "And I'm not going to do it again."

"Well, I just about ruined yours, to-day," replied Sally in a pleased voice. "I forgot myself and barged into the ladies' rest room."

Tim became interested, indignant, then amused.

After dinner that night they compared notes, and because they both felt strange and lonely they occupied the same bed.

Chapter VIII. How Not to Behave at a Church Supper

PETER, SEATED ON A KITCHEN CHAIR, WAS DOING NOTHING more important than scratching his venerable pate with a long, reflective finger. In the fullness of time this heavy operation would produce a vocal reaction. It did. Peter spoke.

"Judy Twill," said Peter, "this house is going plumb to the dogs. Lately it's been all cockeyed."

"Something unnatural has come over it," agreed Judy, turn-

ing from the stove and regarding her husband darkly. "And that's certain sure. Some sort of a curse."

" 'Tisn't a curse so much," pursued Peter academically. "It's more like an intermingling, if you get what I'm driving at. It's a merger, that's what it is."

He paused and once more his finger revolved upon his head as if it were stirring up thoughts in the brain within.

"Strange and uncommon things are going on," he resumed. "Unaccountable things. The master talks like the missus and the missus talks like the master, and before you've had a chance to get used to the change they switch back again to their regular voices. It's upsetting, that's what it is, upsetting. Take that dumb beast there, for instance. Low as he is he deserves some consideration. He hears coming from Miss Sally's mouth the voice of Mr. Tim, yet sitting not ten feet away is Mr. Tim as large as life. It's too much for the dog's mind, which never was good, as you yourself will agree. What does he do? I saw it myself with my own eyes. First he starts to go to one of 'em, then he turns and starts for the other, then not knowing what the devil to do and not wishing to offend either he sits down exactly midway between 'em and looks perplexed. He can't go on living and keeping his health that way. No dog could."

Mrs. Twill had a word to say at this juncture, which meant that for the moment Peter's voice was stilled.

"I can't get over yet what happened the other morning," she observed.

"What was that?" asked Peter obediently.

"Why," explained his wife, "I was having a bit of a set-to with the butcher's delivery boy over a leg of lamb I didn't just take a fancy to when in strolls Miss Sally. She was nearly half naked, she was. That is, her kimono was all open in front. Might just as well not have had it on. She was smoking a big black cigar and carrying a glass of drink. 'What the hell goes on here?' she asks in a deep, rough voice. Then she notices the boy staring at her as if his eyes were going to pop out. 'What are you looking at, funny face?' she rips out. 'Something wrong with my chest? Too much hair on it to suit you?' For

the sake of decency I made a sort of a motion and she looks down at herself and seems startled. Then she looks at the cigar and the glass and begins to giggle. 'So sorry,' says she in the rightful voice that God gave her. 'I didn't know. You see I'm rehearsing a part. Makes me forget myself.' And with that she minces out just as ladylike as can be. I'd like to know what sort of a part she's rehearsing. It will land her in the lock-up if she ever plays it in public."

"Everything's upside down," complained Peter. "She does most of the drinking now while he stays sober. That's no way. Another thing: he's taken to smoking her perfumed cigarettes and she goes round with a cigar in her mouth—I've actually seen her pulling at a pipe. And another funny thing I've noticed. We get two morning papers now instead of one, and when he comes home at night she makes a grab for the evening paper. Never saw a woman take such an interest in the news."

"The other morning I popped in on them and he was actually dressing her," declared Mrs. Twill. "She was cursing and damning like a trooper. 'How in hell do you get this girdle on?' she asked him. Imagine that, a woman asking her husband how to get dressed. And only last night I caught him strutting around in one of her nightgowns. It gave me a fair start, it did."

"This I do know," said Peter. "I get real dizzy now when I'm serving meals. Their voices shift about so quickly that I can't tell which one of them is asking me for things. Have to keep watching their lips to see who's speaking."

"Don't know where it's going to end," quoth Judy Twill.

"Perhaps it's some modern idea," suggested her husband.

"No idea is modern," replied his wife. "These newfangled ideas we hear so much about are just oldfangled ideas that have been tried out and forgotten or lost, but I will admit that whatever their idea is it's absolutely new to me."

Meanwhile the subjects of the Twills' conversation were busily and none too happily dressing for the evening.

"I've always had ideas of my own about the way women should dress," observed Tim, "and now that I am a woman to

all intents and purposes I'm going to put them into practice."

"Do, dear," remarked his wife sweetly. "I hope they're more attractive than going about half naked in an old shirt or the top part of a pair of pajamas."

"Wish I could get those days back again," said Tim with a heavy sigh.

"You should go on a diet," Sally protested. "Honestly, Tim, I wish you would. If you don't my beautiful figure will be completely ruined. You should take better care of your wife's body."

"Well, be extremely careful what you do with mine," admonished Tim. "If I ever get it back again I'd like to find it the way it left me."

Here he looked thoughtfully at Mr. Ram. In Tim's eyes there was a respectful appeal, a mute entreaty.

"I think he's responsible," he told his wife. "I have an idea that little fellow up there is at the bottom of all our troubles."

"If he is," said Sally, "I hope he has a heart. We've never done anything to the little blighter. In fact, we've treated him very decently. Given him the place of honor."

Tim's thoughts were on other things.

"To-night, for example," he observed, "I think I'll just wear that black georgette pleated skirt of yours and that stunning red blouse."

"Take care of the blouse," said Sally. "Don't spill soup on it. I like that blouse. Wish I could wear it myself."

"I'll take care of the damn thing," answered Tim, "but honestly, Sally, I don't see why we have to go to this church supper. I've never been to a church supper and my technique will be rotten."

This discussion had been going on for a week, and Sally's nerves were becoming a bit frayed at the edges.

"Tim, dear," she said wearily, "I don't want to go to this washout any more than you do, but I must be there. I gave Dr. Jordan my word a long, long time ago, and now that you're me you've got to keep my word. That's all there is to it."

"What a deuce of a fine idea that is," complained Tim. "Hope you haven't dated me up for any taffy-pulling parties or sewing bees or æsthetic dancing circles. I hate like hell to go to-night. It's hard to face a church supper."

"You don't like the cocktail parties I pull here," she replied, "and you don't like church suppers. Will you kindly tell me just what you do like?"

"You might be wearing my body," said Tim bitterly, "but your brain is just as illogical as it ever was. If I go to this joyless affair I've got to be primed before I start. Scream down to Peter to bring up a bottle of rye."

Sally humored him. It was the only thing to do under the circumstances. She had to get him to the supper. It was going to be a superior sort of supper. All of the best people were going to be there, which meant, of course, the worst. Sally was determined that she should be seen although she realized with a feeling of dread that in trusting her body to Tim she was placing her reliance in a frail craft indeed.

"All I ask is that you don't get me—my body, I mean—all lit up," she said as Tim gulped down a drink. "And keep your own mind sober. You'll need it."

In spite of the injunction, both Tim and Sally were excessively well primed when they drove off to the supper.

"Don't forget," she told her husband, who was looking as pretty as a picture, "Dr. Jordan is a real sport, a regular hail-fellow-well-met sort."

"I know," said Tim. "He's a he-man, red-blooded and all that. I'll hate him. I'll hate everybody."

When they reached the church Tim parked the car on a side street where darkness abetted indulgence. After a steep drink from a flask that lived in one of the side pockets of the car they wiped their lips, took a couple of deep breaths, shook themselves and made for the church. Sally little suspected that beneath Tim's skirt, strapped securely round his waist and held cleverly in a little holster of his own devising, rested a small but sufficient bottle of rye whiskey. Had she known this the situation might still have been saved. Unfortunately, however,

she was unaware of the existence of this potential source of danger.

"Now don't leave me," Tim breathed to Sally, smelling noxiously of strong drink. "I'm depending on you to steer me through this slaughter."

"I know," replied his wife, looking down at him from her superior height, "but the trouble is you're supposed to be steering me through the slaughter. It's all quite mad."

"And as it should be," added Tim, at which both of them laughed loudly and entered the church in high merriment for no particular reason.

The supper was held in the basement of the church. It was a great, gaunt chamber with naked brick walls that flung back vindictively the songs that were flung against them. The place was now filled with long tables and long-looking people, long people with strained faces and bright smiles. Here and there were animated little groups of the smart set, the individual members of which tried so hard to be sweet and hearty whenever approached by a regular, bona-fide church supperite. Yet over these little groups hung an atmosphere of guilt and fear. For once they were out of their element, and where the real church worker walked with a confident tread these swagger members of the damned moved with a halting step. It was as if they felt that at any moment they would be committed irretrievably to something—to something dismal and demanding.

Church suppers should be. There is nothing else quite like them. There is nothing else within a mile of them. A person who has never attended a church supper has neither lived nor savored life. It is not wise to refuse an invitation to a church supper. It is not courageous. As a rule one gets a pretty good meal for a pitiful little piece of change. Of course one pays a thousand times over in mental anguish. One must be hearty and innocently merry at a church supper, and this comes hard to most of us. Then again, one must sing at a church supper, or at least give the appearance of singing. Also, at a church supper one must shake hands with people one doesn't know and whom one doesn't want to know. One must talk with these people

and at the same time restrain the impulse to scream piercingly and to commit murder. There are ever so many things one must and must not do at a church supper. Among the hardest of the things one must not do at a church supper is to keep from making maniacal faces and obscene gestures at people who smile upon one with unfair suddenness and dazzling brightness. There are lots of other hard things not to do. For example: when the faded lady at your side sighs deeply and asks, "Don't you think poor Dr. Scraggs is overworking? He looks so tired to-night"—when the faded lady uncorks that one it is a very difficult thing not to reply rudely, "Indeed I don't. In my opinion, madam, Dr. Scraggs has one hell of an easy life. In my opinion he doesn't work half hard enough. And as for him looking tired—stuff and nonsense! It's the bunk, madam. The Rev. Dr. Scraggs is merely bored, and you are partly responsible."

Of course this answer might be quite untrue, for the Rev. Dr. Scraggses frequently are both overworked and underpaid, yet there is a deal of satisfaction to be derived in brutally offending one's neighbor at a church supper. One instinctively feels like doing it.

If one stopped to consider the hard work, the high hopes, and the tons of good will and better intentions that go to make every church supper a horrid reality one would be sunk in a mire of self-accusation and spiritual depression. But one must not think of such things unless one enjoys crying into one's soup. To enjoy a church supper in the right spirit one must be able to take it or leave it just like that. It's easy enough to take a church supper, but to leave it is an entirely different matter. It is almost impossible to leave a church supper. Houdini himself was never able to escape a church supper. Prisons, yes. Fortresses, yes. Chests at the bottom of rivers, yes, yes. Church suppers, no. His one great failure. They go on and on and on, do church suppers. After a while one gains the impression that one is going to live the remainder of one's life at a church supper. One speculates whether it would not be a wise thing to send for one's trunks and furniture so as to be properly equipped to do full justice to this

church supper. The faces of old friends appear in fancy, and well-loved places now forever left behind float before one's aching eyes.

And yet one smiles brightly at a church supper and keeps on smiling though not quite so brightly for interminable hours, and after it's all over one goes home and kicks one's dog, beats one's wife, sets fire to one's neighbor's house, and feels a great deal better.

"I seem to see," observed Tim, confronting this church supper, "quite a number of old ladies and they all look alike with the exception that some are thin and tired while others are stout and tired. I suspect them of being Supper Ladies."

"They are," whispered Sally. "They constitute the very backbone of the supper."

"Then I don't want to eat it," said Tim resolutely.

"Those old ladies—we call them the Girls—are the only real persons here," Sally explained rapidly. "They've thought this supper, planned this supper, sweated over this supper, and they'll probably be too tired to eat the damn supper. I'm glad we came if only for their sake."

"Stop, Sally, you're breaking my heart," said Tim. "I don't know whether the Girls would be so glad to meet us."

"Oh, they'd forgive anything so long as you come to their suppers," replied Sally. "Are you swaying or am I?"

"Both of us are, but in different directions," said Tim. "That's what keeps us from falling. It seems so fantastic to be clinging to my own arm with your hand."

"I don't want to think of it," murmured Sally. "It makes me feel a little distrait."

The grip on her arm suddenly tightened and she heard him gasp.

"Look, Sally," he whispered. "Is that man a maniac? I'm frightened. Take me home."

Far down at the end of the room there was a man seated at a table and on the face of this man there was an expression, or rather, a contortion. In his eyes glowed a wild light. His mouth had achieved the limits of expansion. There were teeth, not

good but abundant. Sally looked upon this man and started visibly, then steadied herself.

"It's all right," she said, "but I never can get used to it, myself. That's the Smile of Welcome and Good Cheer. You will encounter many more, but none quite so well developed. It's one of the features of all church suppers. It also sings lustily and then its eyes turn up."

"Oh, God. Oh, God," breathed Tim. "Do you think it's really happy, that it enjoys being here?"

"You couldn't drive it out," said Sally. "It eats these suppers up spiritually as well as physically."

Suddenly Tim found himself looking a black button closely in the face. The button was on a black vest on which there were still other buttons. Slowly his eyes followed the course of the buttons upward. Would they never end? They did—just under a strong, pink chin. With an effort he kept his eyes going until at last they surmounted the crest of the chin, and to his utter dismay he found them dwelling on a face that was looking down at him with a fixed glare. What eyes! What gleaming teeth! The very vitality of that face unnerved Tim. He swayed forward and grabbed two black-sleeved arms for support. At the same minute Sally, wishing to give a touch of realism to her masculine rôle, slapped the owner of the arms and face resoundingly on the back.

The effect to a bystander was that of a concerted attack by Mr. and Mrs. Willows upon the body and person of the Rev. Dr. Jordan. While one held the man's arms pinned to his sides the other brutally assaulted him. It was the old army game that succeeds nine times out of ten.

The slap had disconcerted Sally far more than it had Dr. Jordan, who stood rooted firm in the faith of God. Sally had no such support. She lost all poise and began to babble in a high, effeminate voice—in her own voice, in fact.

"Oh, Dr. Jordan," she gushed, "I have a surprise for you. I've brought my husband along."

"She means our wife," muttered Tim, still clinging to the preacher's arms. "Don't listen to him."

This correction brought Sally to her senses. She dropped her

voice to a deep rumble, and once more addressed the preacher.

"That's a horse with another kidney," she said jovially. "But what does it matter? Who knows?"

"Knows what?" asked Tim suspiciously.

"Why ask me?" replied Sally. "Perhaps Dr. Jordan does."

But Dr. Jordan didn't. Accustomed as he was to strange and mystifying situations he found himself for the first time unable to function effectively. Gently but firmly he pried himself loose from Tim, who, realizing that something must be done, smiled brightly up at Dr. Jordan and affectionately patted his arm.

"You see, Dr. Jordan, I kept my promise, didn't I?" he said in Sally's most seductive tones. "I did even better than that, but I knew he wouldn't behave. That husband of mine never takes anything seriously."

The great face of Dr. Jordan cleared. So that was the explanation. Tim Willows was a bit of a joker. Oh, well, the church needed more of that sort. He could use Tim Willows to advantage. Perhaps he might be induced to become a regular member of the congregation. True, there was a suggestion of rye in the air, but maybe . . . He beamed his beamiest upon the pair and spoke richly.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome, friends," reiterated the doctor. "I need your sort behind me." Tim wondered what he meant by that. "You're a bit of a larker yourself, Mrs. Willows, but a lark flies up to heaven, as you, too, some day shall fly." ("How gloomy," thought Tim.) "Glad to have you with us to-night, Mr. Willows. I hope it will not be the last time. Come in some day and smoke a cigar with me. Mrs. Willows, I expect great things from you to-night. Find tables, find tables." His strong hand swept the room and nearly knocked the false teeth out of the mouth of one of his staunchest workers. "So sorry!" cried the Rev. Dr. Jordan, turning to the injured party, who was clutching or rather muffling his mouth with both hands. And when Dr. Jordan turned back again both Tim and Sally were tottering among the tables.

"Charming couple," thought Dr. Jordan, then moved away from the gentle cloud of alcohol still floating in the air.

"What did he mean about expecting great things of you?" demanded Tim.

"I'm on a committee," replied Sally vaguely. "Civic Betterment. It means nothing."

Blake and Helen Watson, Vera and Ted Hutchens, Flo Jennings and Carl Bentley were grouped in a depressed huddle. They all wore a beaten expression. They were furtively critical and just a trifle superior. At the approach of the Willowses the beaten look on Bentley's face became almost mutilated.

"Ha!" snorted Blake Watson, pulling at his mustache. "Hah!"

"Bah!" retorted Tim, looking at the man coldly through Sally's brown eyes. "What a hell of a jam this is."

At the sound of Tim's voice issuing from the sweet lips of Sally the statuesque Mr. Bentley gave a start and began to sweat unbecomingly.

"My dears!" exclaimed Sally, squeezing Vera's and Helen's hands with her much larger ones. "So sweet of you to have come. I knew you wouldn't let me down."

And with this she kissed them both.

"What's the big idea?" cried Blake Watson, giving Sally a violent push.

This treatment of his wife immediately aroused Tim. With a small foot he neatly tripped Watson, who fell with a crash among the chairs.

"Nobody can treat my wife that way," he announced, looking down at the fallen man.

Helen, although only occasionally fond of her husband, could not permit this incident to pass unnoticed.

She clawed Tim's hat from his head and threw it on the floor. Sally, more outraged by the treatment of her hat than her husband, promptly shoved Helen down on top of Blake Watson, then, taking Tim's arm, moved majestically away, disassociating herself as well as her spouse from the scene of disorder. It had all happened so quickly that even those who had been privileged to witness the scene at close range ascribed it to an accident. Church supper chairs are constantly doing things to people. They are almost human in their perverseness,

either collapsing on a person or making a person collapse. Of course the noise attracted a great deal of attention, but the false and desperate laughter of the Watsons and the Hutchenses, swelled by the hearty boom of Mr. Bentley, served to dispel any suggestion of unpleasantness. Nevertheless the members of the little group were dazed. The strange conduct of the Willowses had momentarily numbed their faculties.

"Both of them are as drunk as coots," said Ted Hutchens. "That's the only way I can explain it."

"She actually knocked me down," observed Blake Watson in a puzzled voice.

"And he darned well hurled me down," put in Helen. "It was a sort of mixed scuffle as far as I can make out."

"It was very interesting to watch," drawled Vera. "The hat part was pretty. How did you ever come to think of that form of retaliation?"

"It was an inspiration," said Helen. "Sally loves her hats."

"We all do—when we get them," remarked Vera, with a significant look at her husband.

"You don't love hats," sneered Mr. Hutchens. "You bow down and fairly worship them."

A middle-aged but infinitely weary-looking woman came up to Tim and took him by the arm.

"Dear Mrs. Willows," she said in an harassed voice, "would you mind lighting that newfangled gasoline stove for us? You're so clever about such things."

Sally, with a smile of unholy enjoyment, watched the dazed Tim being dragged off in the direction of the kitchen.

"Which stove do you mean?" asked Tim of the weary woman. The kitchen seemed full of stoves, all of which were working briskly.

"That one," replied the woman, pointing to a sinister-looking object squatting defiantly in one corner.

"Ah," said Tim with the confidence born of alcohol. "I'll show you how to light that baby. It's really quite simple."

So saying, he turned on a tap until his ears were pleased by the jocund sound of gurgling fluid. Then he struck a match, pushed a button, and applied the light. There was a muffled

boom, an odoriferous flame, then the room became lost in a deep, heavy pall of gaseous vapor. And from the bosom of this reeking cloud issued a volley of vile obscenities uttered in the deep voice of an infuriated male. The edges of this vocal display of frightfulness were garnished by the stifled shrieks of women. A short time later the Girls, gallantly led by Tim, debouched into the supper room like a troupe of blackfaced comediennes. Never had the Girls received such a shock and never had a church supper been so lively and entertaining. First Mr. and Mrs. Watson had got themselves entangled in some chairs, and actually fallen down on the floor in a most diverting manner. This was hugely funny and furnished no end of bright conversation. But to see the Girls in battle array issuing from the smoke of the kitchen was almost too much of a good thing. Of course, the explosion occasioned a certain amount of consternation, but this was quickly dispelled as soon as the bellowing voice of Dr. Jordan assured the company that all danger was past. The Girls and Tim required a certain amount of washing, which was administered by willing and tender hands. During the process of ablution Tim found an opportunity to empty virtually all of the contents of his flask. When once more he appeared in public he was feeling decidedly set up. The Girls were much more interested in trying to discover the source of the obscene language than that of the explosion. They never did, although they entertained some well-founded suspicions.

The supper proceeded coughingly, and although the food tasted weirdly of smoke and gasoline it was consumed with true Christian humility and fortitude. Then came the singing, which taxed the Willowses far beyond their capacity to stand taxing. This was especially true of Tim. At one moment he sang lustily in a clear, unmistakable baritone and at the next he startled both himself and everyone within hearing distance by swooping up to the dizzy altitudes of a soprano. Sally was experiencing the same difficulty, only not to the same extent. It was entirely forgivable if those sitting at her table were rendered mute with amazement when they heard proceeding from the mouth of an adult male the trebling alto of a choir

boy. It is even more forgivable if they gasped with incredulity when they heard those ringing notes descend to a faint, embarrassed rumble. Up and down the scales fluctuated the voices of the Willowses until at times they seemed almost inspired. During a lull in the singing a lady leaned over to Tim and said, "My dear, I don't know how you can do it."

"It's a gift," replied Tim modestly. "I don't know how I manage it myself. Nobody ever taught me."

"Nobody should," remarked an old man.

When a long-faced individual asked Sally how she accomplished the feat she passed it off by saying that her mother's great-aunt by marriage had been a professional ventriloquist. This answer only partially satisfied the man. He kept brooding over the problem of how much influence one's mother's great-aunt by marriage could have on one's voice. Not a great deal, he decided. Certainly, not enough to justify the amazing demonstration of vocal gymnastics he had just heard.

The singing ended, the speeches began, but little did Tim realize that he was to be among the speakers until he heard Dr. Jordan calling in a loud voice for Mrs. Sally Willows to address the assembled multitude on the subject of Civic Betterment.

"I'll do no such damn thing," Tim muttered to Sally.

"Don't let me down, Tim," she whispered. "You know as much about the subject as anyone else. Go on up there and just say you approve of civic betterment and all that."

Whether it was Sally or the liquor within him that prevailed upon Tim to mount the platform and stand swaying dangerously at its edge will never be known. The fact remains that he did this mad act and actually offered himself up on the altar of Christian martyrdom.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began in a voice that snapped the supperites erect in their chairs. "Members of the Congregation," he continued in softly cooing accents. "Friends, would perhaps be better," he amended rather briskly. "I shall soon get started. A short time ago I gave a successful demonstration of how not to light a gasoline stove. I shall now endeavor to show you how not to make a speech."

Tim paused to permit his audience to become convulsed, and during that pause he lost control of his thoughts and almost lost his balance.

"Look out!" Sally whispered piercingly, and Tim swayed back from the edge of the platform.

"Friends," he began again, this time making no effort to disguise his voice, "I believe in physic betterment—I mean, civic betterment. We should have a bigger and better civic—pardon me again, I mean, physic—no, I don't—what I mean is, we should have a bigger and better betterment. Oh, yes, and a much bigger and better city. We must have much wider streets with lots of sidewalk cafés." Desperately Tim's hands sought for his pockets and, finding none, plucked impotently at his skirt. "And we should have bigger gardens," he continued. "Great big gardens running off to the skyline. Everything should be bigger, much bigger and much better. Bigger houses, bigger schools, bigger stores, bigger everything. Great big moving-picture theaters with fountains. Must have fountains." Once more Tim's hands struggled into non-existent pockets and succeeding in disarranging his skirt. Sally was beginning to get nervous. "Then there's another thing. We should have bigger and better churches. And I suggest that congregations should be drafted so that all the churches would be filled and the preachers wouldn't have to deliver their sermons to eleven or twelve dispirited-looking ladies who don't need to be saved. And I believe in free education for preachers. So many preachers are dumb because they lack the time and opportunity to continue their studies. Give 'em a chance to dig into economics, psychology, and sociology—any number of subjects. Give the poor devils a break, say I." Here the dress was strained to its utmost. "On the other hand I believe in the legalization of the ancient and honorable profession of prostitution." Gasps from the audience. Wild signals from Sally, but Tim was warming to his subject. "Many a sweet girl has gone wrong because she was not allowed to become a good, honest prostitute. Do you know that last year 2,540 girls disappeared from their homes? Why, I ask you, why? Why did all those lovely girls disappear from their homes? Because they weren't

allowed to become good, honest prostitutes—that is, most of them." He paused to watch the frantic approach of the Rev. Dr. Jordan. "Prostitution is an amiable and artistic profession. It develops a social instinct and——"

At this point the dress gave up all resistance and descended with a snap. The next moment the person believed to be Mrs. Sally Willows stood before the supperites and gave them the shock of their lives. The Rev. Dr. Jordan, whether from modesty or admiration, stopped in his tracks and gazed at the lovely figure. The step-ins were becomingly short and Sally's legs were becomingly shaped. Altogether the revelation was not at all bad. The supperites were in a state of ferment. Tim was almost frantic. He was making fluttering signals of anguish to Sally. Strange to say, disgraceful to say, that hard-boiled young lady was laughing. Tim could have poisoned her. What had broken Sally down was the small flask of whiskey strapped so neatly around Tim's waist. The presence of that flask explained a lot to Dr. Jordan. In fact, it explained everything. Tim took a few frightened steps, tripped and fell. During the general commotion that followed, Sally adjusted Tim's dress and dragged the broken man from the church. Once in the car she gave him a huge drink. Then she drove him home herself.

"Well," said Tim at last, "we certainly made a go of that church supper."

"Yes," agreed Sally. "The Willowses were an immense social success—a riot, in fact."

"And the Rev. Dr. Jordan got a great deal more than he expected," added Tim.

"You opened his eyes to a lot of things," said Sally.

Chapter IX. A Shocking Discovery

WHEN TIM WILLOWS DISCOVERED HE WAS GOING TO BECOME A mother he nearly went mad. Sally was forced to lock up all the grog and to take a day off from the office in order to be with the semi-demented prospective mother of her child.

"I won't be a mother," Tim assured her in a trembling voice. "I'll do something terrible to myself. A lake—that's it. You'll find me in a lake. All wet."

"Now don't work yourself up, dear," said Sally soothingly. "It will be bad for baby. Let me give you this footstool, sweetheart. It will make you much more comfortable. And I'll get you a little shawl."

In response to these tender endearments, Tim Willows unleashed a scream of rage and dashed about the room looking for something to break. He picked up a clock, considered it, then returned it to its place. The clock was too expensive. Anyway he liked that clock. Finally he selected a large china vase. It made a very satisfactory sound when it crashed against the floor. He danced madly on the fragments, then fell exhausted into a deep chair.

"I can't stand it," he gasped. "I can't. Footstools and shawls. Oh, God."

"You should be ashamed of yourself to carry on like that," admonished Sally. "One would think you were demeaning yourself to be the mother of my child."

Once more Tim's scream of impotent rage rang through the house. Springing up, he seized upon another china vase, which he shattered against the floor. The first one had proved efficacious. Why not this one?

"Thank God, they're gone," said Sally, as she led the trembling man back to his chair. "I've always felt like smashing them myself, but never could work up the courage. If it hadn't been for baby, they might have remained in the Willows family for generations. What are you hoping for, dear, a boy or a girl?"

"A gorilla," gritted Tim. "A monster. A two-headed calf."

"Don't be silly, sweetheart," Sally told him. "You should have nothing but sweet and fragrant thoughts now. I'll get you a book about it—*The Program of a Prospective Mother*. You'll love it. It will do you good."

Weakly, Tim looked round the room for another vase, then abandoned the idea through sheer physical lassitude.

"You stop calling me 'dear' and 'sweetheart' and all those

things," he muttered darkly. "And if you bring that book into this house, I'll burn it up on the front lawn and dance round the fire naked, screaming the vilest words I can muster."

"But, Tim, precious," explained Sally, patiently, "neither of us knows the first thing about motherhood, or childbirth or anything along those lines."

"Don't want to know," snapped Tim. "Bring me a book on how to forestall a prospective infant and you'll be doing a guy a good turn. I feel like going upstairs and wringing that damn little idol's neck. Of all the tricks to play on a self-respecting man. It was a bad day for us when that libidinous uncle of mine conceived the bright idea of sending him to us."

"Don't talk disparagingly of Mr. Ram at this critical time," said Sally. "We'll be needing all the luck he can bring us. They say the first one is always the hardest."

"What?" ejaculated Tim. "The first one? Do you think for a moment I'd have another, assuming I have this one?"

"I see no reason why you shouldn't," replied Sally, callously. "I see no reason why you shouldn't have several. It's high time we were doing something in the line of babies. Neither of us is getting any younger."

"That's right!" cried Tim. "Make a regular Negro mammy out of me. Make me bear such a brood of children I won't know exactly how many I have. I suppose you're hoping for twins to begin with."

"Twins would be awfully cute," admitted Sally. "While you're at it, you might as well make up for lost time."

"You seem to regard me as a sort of factory," Tim observed bitterly. "If I bear one very small and reluctant baby, you can consider yourself lucky."

"Nonsense," replied Sally, cheerfully. "I expect great things from you."

"So did Dr. Jordan," said Tim. "And he got much more than he expected."

"Everyone will be so pleased and excited when they find out," Sally observed with a bright, anticipatory smile. "All the girls. Think of it."

"I'll not even listen to it, much less think of it," retorted

Tim. "If you breathe a word of this to a single living soul, I'll do something desperate and you'll be eternally sorry. Just stick that in your hatband and keep it there as a reminder."

"Oh, we'll have to let them know," protested Sally.

"That's just what we won't have to do," said Tim. "Let 'em find out for themselves. They'll know soon enough. God, what a thing to have happened to a man. I guess I'm the first member of my sex ever to have gotten this way."

"You should be proud of the fact," replied Sally. "And think of my feelings. I'll be the first woman ever to have become a father."

Tim looked at her hatefully.

"That's right," he muttered. "Go on and gloat. Feel proud and chesty. You should be ashamed of yourself for getting me in this ridiculous, not to say dangerous, condition. Suppose you lose me?"

"We must take our chances on that," said Sally, with what Tim felt was altogether too much complacency.

"You mean I must take my chances," he retorted with mild sarcasm. "You are taking no chances. It's pretty soft for you."

"I'll be very upset and nervous," replied Sally.

"Bah!" exclaimed Tim. "You'll probably get squiffed and celebrate with Steve Jones. But believe me, I'm going to make you pay through the nose for the dirty trick you've played on me. When a woman's this way she has to be humored. You know that as well as I do. At any time of the day or night, you must humor a prospective mother. And I'm going to have cravings. I'm going to think of the strangest damn things."

"All right," agreed Sally. "That's good with me. I'd do almost anything to have a baby."

"Except have one," put in Tim.

"It's not my fault," said Sally. "It's a physical impossibility. And Tim, dear, you will continue to write copy for me to take to the office?"

"Inasmuch as our bread and butter depend on it, I guess I'll have to," replied Tim. "At any rate, it will take my mind off of the horrible condition I'm in. But tell me, don't you know the first thing about childbirth, Sally?"

"Well, I know the first thing," she admitted. "That is, how to go about starting one."

"Don't be facetious," said her husband. "I know all about that, too. What I mean is, doesn't it hurt a bit?"

"From all that I've heard," she told him, "it's not what you might call a soothing experience."

"And you get awfully large, don't you?" Tim continued, with the fascination of horror in his voice.

"Tremendous," said Sally, warming to the subject. "And sometimes sick in the morning."

"I'm that now," put in Tim. "Very."

"Then you must be a shade pregnant," Sally observed with assurance. "It's almost a sure sign."

Tim brightened a little.

"But, Sally," he said, "you're not absolutely sure I'm going to be a mother, are you? There might be some mistake. I mean it's just possible?"

"Of course, there's just a chance," replied Sally. "That's why I have to take you to a doctor."

"What!" cried Tim. "And be examined? Never in this life. I won't stand for that."

He shrank back in his chair and looked miserable. The thought of the doctor revolted him. Was ever a man in such a fix? Strange that at that moment his thoughts should revert to Claire Meadows. He wondered what she would think of the situation. A strange woman.

"But you must, Tim, darling," laughed Sally. "Don't be so stupid. Everyone goes to a doctor. It's the only thing to do. Especially with us. We don't know a darned thing about it. Have to get some honest-to-God advice. Have to learn things and find out what you must do with yourself—what to eat and what not to eat, and, most important of all, how much you can drink, if any."

"Hope he doesn't stop my grog," said Tim. "That is, not entirely. Before we go to this doctor, you've got to give me a drink or so. Otherwise I'll call the whole childbirth off."

Sally agreed because she realized that it would be in all likeli-

hood the last time the poor devil would be able to indulge. It seemed a shame to stop Tim's grog. He enjoyed it so. Give him a bottle and a book, and life for him was complete. He demanded of it nothing more.

Peter brought a fresh bottle of rye and some glasses and a siphon. After he had deposited these on a convenient table he stood looking appreciatively at the remains of the shattered vases. He was glad, but at the same time uneasy. If they began breaking up the household effects, they'd soon be eating off the floor like animals.

"I broke them, Peter," offered Tim, in what he hoped was a sweet voice. "I did it in a fit of rage. And I knew you didn't like them. You can clear away the remains later."

"Thank you, Miss Sally," said Peter. "They were horrid things. Remember when they were bought. His great-aunt, Mrs. Ames Willows, brought them home one day. They occasioned a great disturbance. Mr. Ames went on a bender for a month. It didn't take much to send him off, he was so high-strung." Peter paused and gazed reflectively at the table. "He was fond of the bottle, too," he added significantly.

"Listen, Sally," said Tim, when Peter had left the room. "I've had something on my mind I've been wanting to tell you for a long time. Now that I'm in this serious condition, I think I will."

"Shoot, old kid," replied Sally, as she sipped the highball.

"Well, you know the night I nearly murdered Carl Bentley?" he began.

"I'll never forget it," said Sally.

"Well, that night," continued Tim, "I drifted quite accidently over to Claire Meadows' house and—and I didn't act quite right. I guess I was a bit unfaithful."

"If you can only guess about it," said Sally, "it mustn't have been much of a party."

"It was more like a dream," replied Tim in a low voice. "Like being inevitably guided in a dream. No power to control circumstances and no desire, Sally. But it was real, all right. You know I was in a bit of a fog—a dense fog, in fact."

He gulped down his drink and looked at Sally out of her own limpid, brown eyes. She in turn was regarding him with affectionate amusement.

"Pregnancy," she remarked easily, "is already making an honester man of you." She paused to refill the glasses. "You know," she continued quite seriously, "I can't find it in me to blame you for being unfaithful with Claire Meadows. To me she is the most irresistible woman in town. Anyway, I wasn't doing so well myself that night. As a matter of fact, I started you out on the primrose path. It's a funny thing, though. It's insight, that's what it is. When I first met Claire Meadows many months ago, I had the weirdest feeling that some day you two were going to get together. She's the sort of person who'd appreciate you and your silly attitude toward life and things. Yet, I had the comforting feeling, also, that she was not the woman you should have married. I'm that woman, or, at least, I was. Both of you are too hard-boiled and at the same time too idealistic. You'd burn each other up. You'd hurt each other terribly in some fool way." Once more Sally paused and a slow smile, a wicked smile, crooked the lips that had once been Tim's. "Just the same, Tim," she resumed, "I'm much obliged for the tip. Think I'll drop round to see Claire Meadows some night. She must be missing you, old thing."

"And me in this condition!" Tim cried indignantly. "You'll do no such thing, Sally Willows. Now that you've got me all funny the way I am, I'll be damned if I'll stand for any monkey business. I'll abort myself, or whatever it is you do."

"Now don't get yourself all worked up and nervous over nothing," said Sally, soothingly. "Of course, I was only joking. I wouldn't think of doing such a thing."

"And you're not going about with a lot of light women, when I get all fat and ugly," continued Tim, getting himself all fumed up and excited at the ghastly ramifications of his condition. "Give me another drink. I'm terribly cast down. I'll stand for no messing about. Do you understand that?"

"Of course, I do, dear," said Sally, smiling in spite of herself. "Don't worry your head about me. I've learned my lesson. I almost made you a murderer once, and I did make you an

adulterer. You're indebted to me for the latter although you may deny it."

"This is the weirdest darn conversation that ever took place between man and wife," replied Tim, somewhat mollified, as he reached for the bottle.

"No question about it," agreed Sally. "But I try not to think of it any more. You get sort of goofy if you do."

Under the influence of the bottle, and morally liberated by his confession, Tim's spirits rose until, by the time he had reached the doctor's office, they had become rather unruly, almost boisterous.

"Hello, Doc!" he cried, throwing his arms round the neck of the astounded physician. "My wife, here, tells me I'm a wee bit pregnant. Not much, Doc, not much, but enough—almost too much. What about it, Doc, do you think I'm elected? Do I look sort of preggy?"

"That's a silly word," commented Sally. "Sounds like baby talk."

Tim was almost convulsed. He released the doctor and flung himself upon Sally.

"That's just what it is," he cried. "It's baby talk, and it's all your fault, or at least, I think it is. Somebody blundered."

At this point the doctor interposed in a suave voice while still adjusting his collar. Addressing himself in low tones to Sally, he suggested politely, "This is a mental case, I perceive?"

"Alcoholic," replied Sally briefly. "Also somewhat pregnant."

"And mental, too, Doc," interpolated Tim. "Don't forget that. I'm entirely mad, I assure you. And I'm going to have a mad baby—a regular monster."

The doctor ignored Tim and turned once more to Sally.

"And the object of your visit, sir, is exactly what?" he asked.

"Absolutely no object," put in Tim. "Just a visit. We thought you might like to know about me, that's all."

"And to congratulate us, perhaps," added Sally, who was feeling quite giddy herself.

"Yes," declared Tim. "We thought you might slip us a snifter. Doctors have lots of whiskey. They love it."

"May I ask just who you are?" demanded the doctor, his disgust getting the better of his professional urbanity.

"Oh, we thought you knew that," exclaimed Sally. "Everyone knows us. We're the Willowses. This is my husband—I mean my wife, Mrs. Tim Willows. I'm Tim, himself, in the flesh."

The doctor was undecided whether to call for assistance and forcibly eject this peculiar couple or to try to get rid of them peaceably.

"I presume, then," he observed, "that you would like me to—er—run over Mrs. Willows?"

"What's that?" demanded Tim. "Run over? Does the man think he's a lawn mower or a sort of human Juggernaut? I didn't come here to be run over."

"Are babies in your line, Doctor?" asked Sally, also ignoring her husband.

"I'm an obstetrician, if that's what you mean, sir," replied the doctor with dignity.

"He's a what?" demanded Tim.

Both Sally and the doctor looked at Tim wearily.

"You wouldn't understand, dear," she told him. "He obsteterates, does this doctor, so it seems that we've come to the right place."

"Well, that's nice to know, at any rate," commented Tim, seating himself in a most uncomfortable chair.

"Could you tell me just when you noticed you were in this condition?" asked the doctor.

"Never noticed it at all, Doc," answered Tim. "It sort of crept up on me like a—a—er—thief in the night."

"Or a wolf on the fold," added Sally.

"I don't seem to find this very helpful," said the doctor, rather impatiently. "I had better examine Mrs. Willows."

"One minute, Doc," interposed Tim, holding up a restraining hand. "Before we go any further, I'd like to know how much it's going to set me back to have this baby. Because if

it costs too darned much, we'll waive the baby and buy a new car."

When Tim discovered it would cost about five hundred dollars to cover the entire expense involved in presenting his wife with a child, he was terribly shocked.

"What!" he exclaimed. "All that money for the fun of suffering like hell? Why, it's a racket, a regular racket. Women should be paid to have babies, and as for a man, why he should be elected mayor, to say the least."

The doctor, becoming more aroused, informed Tim definitely and categorically that personally it was a matter of the most abysmal indifference to him whether he, Tim, had a baby or not.

"That's not very neighborly of you, Doc," Tim replied. "If women didn't have babies you'd be out of luck. You'd probably have to become a magician and pull rabbits and things out of hats. It isn't an easy life."

"I could find something better to do than that," replied the docor, stung by Tim's remark.

"For example?" asked Tim challengingly.

"Mrs. Willows," the doctor explained, "if you and your husband dropped in merely to pay me a personal call, I must remind you that in spite of my gratification there are other demands on my time. Do you wish to be examined or not?"

"Suppose I don't pass this examination," demanded Tim, "won't I be able to have a baby, then? Is it a written or verbal examination? It doesn't matter, though, because I don't know the first thing about childbirth. Why don't you examine my wife instead—I mean, my husband? He's nearly as dumb as I am, but at least he knows something. The whole damn business is Greek to me. I was never intended to be a mother, and if it hadn't been for my innocence, which is a nice word for ignorance, I wouldn't be the way I am now. You men seem to think that all a woman has to do is to toss off a baby and call it a day. Let me tell you right here, Doctor whatever-your-name-is, it's men like you and my husband, lecherous, low-down, licentious bums——"

"Madam, madam," objected the doctor. "I've never expe-

rienced such a thing in my life. You must endeavor to calm yourself. We must endeavor to calm each other. In all my professional experience, I've never encountered a prospective mother who was quite so casual and unsympathetic, quite so hardened. It isn't natural. We must endeavor to correct your mental attitude. Do you, or do you not, wish to be examined? If you don't, well and good, but if you do, I urge you to come inside with me. Mr. Willows can come with you if you want him."

The doctor's voice was shaking a little and his nerves were beginning to jump. He realized how important it was for him to keep strict check on himself. Once let a woman get talking among her friends about the unfeeling methods of a doctor and he might just as well abandon his practice and move to another town.

"I wouldn't let that guy in on my examination for anything in the world," proclaimed Tim resolutely. "He'd gloat, that's what he'd do, and I'll have no gloating."

"Be a good girl and go with the doctor," said Sally coaxingly. "I'll give you something when we get home if you do, otherwise, no—not a drop."

Tim rose from the chair and suspiciously followed the distracted doctor into his private office. A long, oddly twisted glass tube attracted his wandering attention.

"What's this thing for?" he demanded, seizing upon the tube and examining it critically.

Unfortunately the tube slipped from Tim's careless grasp and crashed against the tiled floor with a loud report. The doctor froze in his tracks and hunched his back. Low, clucking sounds came from him. His fingers were twitching spasmodically. But he did not even turn round as he asked in a strained voice, "What was that, Mrs. Willows?"

"Sorry," replied Tim casually. "It was some silly looking object. Didn't have any sense to it, seemingly. You're well rid of it, Doctor."

At this remark, the doctor renewed his clucking. He was gallantly striving to pull himself together. Sally, sitting outside, on hearing the report, naturally assumed that either the doctor

had shot Tim or Tim had shot the doctor. She sprang from the chair and popped into the room.

"What's that?" she demanded tragically.

The doctor jumped and spun about, then settled shudderingly to rest.

"Don't startle me so!" he exclaimed. "I'm not at all used to such conduct."

"No," put in Tim easily. "Don't startle the doctor any more. He can't stand it. You know, I think we'd better examine him first before he examines me. He doesn't strike me as being any too good at present. No control."

This observation had the effect of starting the doctor off on his clucking again. He went to a shelf and, taking down a bottle, poured out a drink.

"A small sedative," he muttered.

"Just what we need," cried Tim, snatching up the bottle and taking an avid gulp. "A rose by another name would taste as strong."

He passed the bottle to Sally, who followed his example, smacking Tim's lips at the end of the operation. The doctor rushed up and forcibly retrieved his property.

"You mustn't do that," he chided. "It's not the way to act, not at all the way to act."

"Pardon me," replied Sally sweetly. "I thought the drinks were on the house."

At this moment Tim pressed a button on a switchboard and from somewhere in the room a dynamo began to tear through its paces. The button seemed to be in some way connected with the doctor, because he began to jump up and down as if he were riding an invisible pogo stick.

"Keep away! Keep away!" he shouted. "You'll burn yourself to a crisp. The X-ray's gone mad."

"What a fascinating life a doctor leads," commented Tim, above the hum of the dynamo.

This restarted the clucking on the part of the doctor, who was sliding along the wall in the direction of the button. When the switch was turned off, he carefully mopped his face with his handkerchief and took a deep breath.

"Another mild sedative," suggested Sally, presenting herself before the weary man with a glass half filled with whiskey.

"Thanks," he muttered, as he tremblingly reached for the glass. "The effect of the first one was spoiled. I do wish we could get along with this examination."

"Directly, Doctor, directly," said Tim, in a soothing voice. "What you need is a good rest. Can't burn the candle at both ends, you know. Your nerves are all shot."

"Yes," added Sally, solicitously. "What you need is a nice long rest." She took a sip from the bottle, then passed it on to Tim. "Would you like to lie down for a moment before you go on? Must get over that shaking. You're not addicted to drugs, are you, Doctor?"

This time the physician's clucking was not only excited but also bitter. He pawed at the air.

"Please go away," he said, in a pleading voice. "Don't talk to me now."

"It's drugs, I'm afraid," murmured Sally, going to the door. "Something should be done."

When Sally had closed the door, the doctor turned to Tim and spoke in a deadly voice.

"Lie down on that table," he said, "and for God's sweet sake, Mrs. Willows, stop fluttering about."

Tim looked at the table suspiciously.

"What are you going to do to me?" he asked.

"That's my business," replied the doctor coldly.

"Not entirely," replied Tim. "I'm in on it, also."

"Are you going to lie down on that table?" demanded the doctor, advancing on Tim with a distracted look in his eye.

"Suppose I don't?" Tim temporized.

"Suppose you don't what?" continued the doctor.

"Lie down on that table," Tim replied.

"If you don't lie down on that table, do you know what I'm going to do?" asked the doctor.

"I don't know," replied Tim.

"Well, I'll tell you," said the doctor, licking his dry lips. "I'm going to damn well hurl you down on that table, Mrs.

Willows. I'm going to get you down on that table if it's the last thing I do on earth."

"Oh, Doctor!" exclaimed Tim coyly.

The doctor stood clucking at Tim.

"Get down on that table," he grated.

Momentarily overawed, Tim hitched himself upon the table and sat there swinging his legs.

"Be reasonable, Doc," he said. "Let's talk this matter over."

"Flat on your back," replied the doctor implacably.

"Just give me a hint," Tim pleaded.

"Down there, down," answered the doctor.

Tim sank back on the table.

"After all, Doctor," he said, "I'm not exactly a dog. Not quite."

The doctor extended his hands.

Exactly thirty seconds later Sally was startled by the sound of a maddened scream, followed by a tremendous crashing of glass. Once more the scream was repeated, then gave way to Tim's deep-throated roaring. The door burst open and the doctor hurtled out with a look of congealed horror on his face. Immediately behind him appeared an infuriated Tim. With one hand he clutched at his clothing and with the other he carved great slices of air with a wicked-looking operating knife. The doctor jumped behind Sally and clung to her for protection.

"Speak to her, Mr. Willows," he chattered. "Reason with her if you can. The poor woman has gone mad."

The shock of suddenly confronting himself restored Tim to his senses. He halted and looked accusingly at the doctor.

"Of all the things to do with a body," Tim exploded, pointing the knife at the trembling man. "Of all the low-life tricks. He might be a doctor, but he's certainly not a gentleman."

"She doesn't understand, Mr. Willows," hastily put in the doctor. "She's just like a savage."

"What did he do?" asked Sally.

"What did he do?" repeated Tim indignantly. "What didn't he do. That guy did plenty. What a way to carry on. You're a fast worker, Doc. I'll have to say that much for you. But life is not all play, Doc. You'd better remember that."

"I thought you knew," explained Sally. "You poor dear."

"Poor dear, hell," snapped Tim. "I almost murdered the man. It's a nice time to tell me about it." He looked at the doctor and a grin spread over his flushed face. "Sorry, Doc," he said. "There seems to have been a slight misunderstanding. We were both right according to our standards."

By this time the doctor himself was in need of medical assistance. Between them they dragged him to his study and dumped him down on the sofa. He was making ineffectual passes at the air with a pair of limp hands. Sally brought the bottle from the almost demolished laboratory and she and Tim took a drink. Then they stood looking speculatively at the doctor.

"Better ring for the maid," said Tim in a low voice. "There doesn't seem to be any secretary knocking about. I thought all doctors managed a secretary by some hook or crook."

"She's sick," gasped the doctor, his professional pride forcing him to speak.

"She would be," replied Tim. "Bathe his temples, Sally, with that grog. He'd chatter the neck off the bottle if you tried to give him a drink."

"Make a try at it," whispered the doctor. "Don't waste the stuff. It's good."

"What thrift," said Tim admiringly.

"All right now?" asked Sally, after she had succeeded in feeding the man a drink.

"Better," whispered the doctor.

"Then I guess we'd better be going," she continued, rather lamely. "We'll come back another time for that examination."

"Okay, Doc?" asked Tim.

They left the doctor clucking wildly on the sofa.

"A most embarrassing experience," observed Tim as they quietly let themselves out of the house.

"What I want to know is," demanded Sally, "how do you expect to have a baby if you won't let a doctor come near you?"

"By long distance," replied Tim. "Or like a woman of the Stone Age. I feel like eating some pineapple."

Chapter X. Tim Seeks Enlightenment

A FEW DAYS LATER, AFTER WOLFING DOWN A ROBUST BREAKFAST, Tim decided to call on his old friend, the village barber. Alfredo had lots of children, children without rhyme or reason. Mrs. Alfredo was always having a baby or about to have a baby or just getting over having a baby. She was in the baby business and seemed able to turn over her stock with surprising regularity and speed. Tim would speak with this Alfredo and pump him about babies. He would inquire into babies, their production and their upkeep. Sally would be surprised at his vast range of information. At the same time he would have his hair trimmed, or rather, he would have his wife's hair trimmed as a pretext for acquiring wisdom. For the moment Tim had forgotten that in his metamorphosed form his old friend, Alfredo, would hardly recognize him.

He slipped on one of Sally's smartest coats and crammed a small black felt hat carelessly on his head. Then he left the house, taking the lunging Dopey with him.

There was a touch of spring in the air and the snow was melting fast. The distant hills were coming through and the sun lay warm upon them. Soon they would arouse themselves from their winter slumber and take steps about getting green. It was quiet along the neat, well-ordered suburban street. Tim felt the quietness. It got inside him. He breathed deeply and stood at the curb, looking about him. He would like to efface all of the houses in sight as well as all of the persons who lived in them. Dopey lunged Tim across the street, then paused himself to investigate nothing much. The dog was too strong for Tim in his female body. Tim suspected that Dopey knew it and was prepared to take advantage of his knowledge. Yes, it was a nice suburb, mused Tim. That was just the trouble with it. It was too damned nice. But the spirit of the people was not so nice. It was too imitative, too acquisitive. A man had to

have exactly what his neighbor had, or better—better if it could be managed. And a man had to live in a certain section or else exist under the burden of a steadily growing inferiority complex. It was sad about that. There were decent men and women living in other sections. Tim liked many of them. But there they were. They were just not on the in, and that was all there was to it. And women had such a way of lording it over their less fortunate sisters. It was cruel and it was senseless. He was glad Sally was not that way. She bought her meat wherever she liked. It was not her method, like so many of her friends', to establish prestige through the butcher or baker. Yes, this suburb would be better with a lot of revisions and deleting. All these real estate people with their quaint ideas and parky minds. Restricted developments and all that. They thrived on snobbery. And in New York the bread lines were twisting round corners. Men standing bleakly in the cold for the privilege of remaining miserably alive on the surface of a world that had no use for them. Yet the bread lines had thoughts and feelings. They were composed of human beings, men who wanted things and who missed things and who watched others live through eyes that were too distantly hopeless even to express envy. And right here in Cliffside men and women were making themselves miserable merely because they could not afford a car as good as Sam Jones's or a radio as fine as Bill Smith's or a home on Upper Clear View Road. It was all out of proportion. Tim realized that he himself was a selfish individual, but at least he didn't get all hot and bothered about those things. Give him a bottle and a book and leave him alone, that was all he asked. He realized that as an individual he could do nothing about the bread lines. He couldn't even help materially one individual member. But he was aware of their existence. That was a start, anyway. Idly his thoughts drifted and absently he delivered a sharp kick on Dopey's adamant rump. The dog made no protest. Tim rather suspected the beast enjoyed an occasional kick. It gave him to feel he was being noticed. Tim wondered if he was always going to be a woman, if life from now on was going to be just one baby after another. He knew he would never be clever about not

having babies. He was altogether too careless and shiftless. He sighed from deep self-commiseration and started off down the street.

"Sally Willows," a voice called.

He turned with a frightened expression and saw, hurrying toward him, a woman who as far as he was concerned had never existed before. Evidently from the warmth of the kiss she gave Tim she must have known Sally quite intimately and liked her. Tim, poor soul, was not enough of a woman to know that the kisses women so liberally exchange with each other mean exactly less than nothing.

"Hello! Hello!" cried the woman.

Tim contented himself with one small "Hello."

"I've come back," said the other. "Here I am."

"Are you sure?" Tim asked her.

"Same old Sally, I see," continued the unknown.

"A trifle renovated," replied Tim. "Perhaps 'altered' would be a better word."

"What's all the news?" demanded the woman.

"The same old thing," said Tim easily. "Scandal and philandering and concealed animosity—envy and a touch of heartbreak thrown in for good measure. The merry whirl, you know."

"It's dreadful how people go on," the recently returned one contributed virtuously. "Of course Dan, my husband, doesn't know this, but I met the grandest man while I was away. I was all on my own, you know."

"Yes," said Tim, trying to keep the sarcasm from his voice. "Dan was just grinding dumbly along while you met the grandest man."

"Dan loves his work," declared the woman. "Couldn't drag him away from it."

"Did you ever try the dragging process?" Tim asked mildly.

"Don't be horrid, Sally," said the other. "Don't you believe a woman should have her own life?"

"Oh, don't misunderstand me," replied Tim. "I believe a woman should have at least nine lives, like a cat. And all the grand men she can handle. It merely occurred to me that if

there wasn't a husband knocking about in the background stupidly loving his work or pretending to love his work she'd have one hell of a time struggling through one life in the manner to which she was accustomed. It was merely a passing thought."

"No doubt about that," agreed the other. "A husband is convenient at times."

"Around the first of the month," suggested Tim, thoroughly hating this woman.

"Yes," said the woman. "What a horrible dog. Where are you off to?"

"That's not a horrible dog," retorted Tim. "That's the finest mixture of canine strains that ever perplexed a bitch. And if you'd like to know, I'm going to get a shave."

"A shave?" exclaimed the woman.

"I mean a trim," Tim hastened to reply. "Did I say a shave? How stupid of me. What I really meant to say was a trim, you know, the hair."

"I'll walk along with you part of the way," said the woman. "That is, if your dog will give me some of the sidewalk."

Dopey received another kick and moved slightly in advance, gratefully wagging his tail. He hated this stopping on street corners and talking to people. It made him nervous.

"Did you ever have a baby?" Tim asked presently, with as much indifference as he could manage.

"Why, don't you remember?" said the woman in a surprised voice. "You came to see me yourself at the hospital."

"Did I?" asked Tim absently. "That was nice of me, but then I'm always doing nice things, and there are so many babies—too many."

The woman laughed.

"You're a queer little duck," she said.

"Aren't I," agreed Tim. "Did it hurt much, this baby?"

"Why didn't you know?" asked the woman. "For days they thought I wasn't going to live. I had septic fever and all sorts of complications."

Tim shrank within himself and looked at the pavement with scared eyes.

"Are there lots of complications you can get?" he asked in a low voice.

"You wouldn't believe how many there are," said the woman. "All sorts of things can happen."

Tim choked down a little gasp.

"Then it was pretty awful?" he went on.

"I wouldn't go through it again for all the money in the world," the woman assured him. "And I'm fond of money, but I was lucky at that."

"How do you make that out?" Tim inquired.

"The woman in the room next to mine died and the one next to her went mad," replied Tim's companion. "Stark, staring mad."

Tim felt that within a very few moments he would follow the example of the woman next to the woman who died.

"Are the doctors kind?" he managed to ask after swallowing hard several times.

"Mine wasn't," replied the other "He was as cross and callous as an old crab. It's quite ghastly," she continued. "I'm glad it's all over. Any woman who has the nerve enough to have a baby has my sympathy. It's nip and tuck for her."

Tim had no use for the woman's sympathy. She was burning him up. He parted with her on Springfield Avenue, and dragged Dopey, squatting sidewise, into the barber shop.

He found Alfredo disengaged and, after elaborate courtesies, seated himself in the glistening Italian's chair. Dopey delicately rested his head on a cuspidor and endeavored to forget everything by going to sleep. Tim was very much upset. His conversation with the unknown woman had sadly shattered his morale.

"How are you to-day, Alfredo?" he asked in a weary voice.

Alfredo paused in his occupation and looked slightly perplexed. Then he glanced behind him to discover if another customer had been speaking, a customer with a strangely familiar voice.

"I am well, madam," he replied at length. "You have been here before, madam?"

The twice repeated "madam" served to remind Tim even in

his preoccupied frame of mind that he was no longer the customer with whom Alfredo had been wont to deal. He smiled sweetly upon the Italian and spoke in a ladylike voice.

"No, Alfredo," he said, "but my husband, Mr. Willows, comes to you often. He has spoken to me of your family. Says you have a splendid lot of children."

Alfredo's eyes and teeth did some fairly snappy sparkling upon the reception of this compliment.

"Mr. Willows, madam," he said. "He's one fine man. One of my best. I like him very much."

"He advised me to come to you for a nice trim," continued Tim, deciding that Alfredo himself was not such a bad fellow. "About your family now—is your wife well? No ill effects?"

"My wife," replied Alfredo complacently, "she make another baby now."

"How interesting," observed Tim. "Does she find it very difficult?"

Alfredo shrugged his shoulders rather discouragingly.

"You know how it is, madam," he said. "It is never good. Like death itself."

"No, I didn't know that," said Tim faintly, sinking a little in the chair.

"It is always bad, madam," continued Alfredo. "There is nothing good about it. The first time, she nearly died."

"O-o-o-o," came shudderingly from Tim.

"Did I hurt, madam?" asked Alfredo, pausing with poised comb.

"No, Alfredo," answered Tim, rallying in the chair. "Everything's splendid. Go right on. You say she nearly died?"

"Yes, madam," continued the barber reminiscently. "My wife she was at the death. What suffering, madam. What anguish. It is always thus with the first."

"O-o-o-o-o," gasped Tim, slumping miserably still farther down in the chair.

"I'm sure I must be hurting, madam," said Alfredo.

"No, Alfredo," answered Tim. "Not the way you think. You're doing fine."

"It was torture, madam, torture," resumed the begetter of many progeny. "She was on the wreck."

"What!" exclaimed Tim, starting up in the chair. "That's painting the lily. She had this baby in a wreck?"

"No, madam," explained Alfredo. "Not in a wreck. She was on this wreck. How do you say—the torture wreck."

Tim's thoughts dwelt broodingly on this mystifying but nevertheless chilling new item of awfulness.

"Because she wouldn't bear down?" he asked. "Is that why they did it?"

Alfredo shrugged his shoulders uncomprehendingly.

"I don't know, madam," he replied. "She was on it, the wreck."

"But they have no right to put people on wrecks when they're going to have babies," protested Tim.

"I don't know," replied Alfredo rather hopelessly. "There she was. On it."

Suddenly the intention rather than the meaning of the Italian's words dawned upon Tim.

"You mean she was on the rack," he suggested. "Isn't that it, Alfredo?"

Once more Alfredo resorted to one of his expressive shrugs.

"It's all the same," he said. "Wreck or rack, she was on it. Untold suffering and danger. Without cease." He paused for a moment, then added proudly, "Italian women have their babies much easier than American."

Upon the receipt of this information Tim's eyes grew round with horror. The hair that Alfredo was trimming endeavored to rise up on its ends.

"You mean they have a harder time of it than your wife?" faltered Tim.

"Much," replied Alfredo generously. "Many die. Poof! They are gone. It is sad."

It was altogether too sad for Tim. When he left the barber shop he was plumbing the depths of spiritual depression. He was going to die, die like a dog on a wreck. There was not the remotest chance of escape. His number was up. Alfredo must

know what he was talking about. Certainly he had had enough experience.

He stopped in front of a grocery store to consider a display of nuts. It was an attractive display. Tim was very fond of nuts. He thought of the vanished bar of a vanished Sherry's where in bygone days he had eaten tons of nuts and swallowed gallons of cocktails. Gone, all gone. His past life swam before him. He was beginning to die a little already, he decided. A baby carriage had been parked near him. With morbid curiosity he bent down and regarded the small and disconcertingly complacent face of its occupant. A nice baby with nice little old wise eyes. A potential murderer. The baby looked long at Tim, then showed him how to blow bubbles without the use of either water or soap. The baby was good at it, had mastered the technique. From the number of bubbles it made it was apparent the baby knew it was putting on a pretty good show. "Bubbles," thought Tim moodily. "For all the good we accomplish in this world we might just as well sit in a carriage and blow bubbles. I've even lost that art." Then the baby's mother appeared. Tim smiled timidly at her.

"You've a lovely baby," he said. "I envy you."

The young mother's face flushed with gratification.

"He's not so bad," she smiled, endeavoring to keep a check on her inordinate pride.

"Did—did—did it hurt much?" asked Tim, almost in a whisper.

"My dear, I almost died," said the woman.

With a choking cry Tim turned from her and hurried down the street. The woman looked after him curiously, then shook her head and dismissed the incident from her mind, for the moment. But Tim did not hurry far. Dopey had other plans. If there was anything the dog loved it was to give the appearance of ferocity without incurring the risk of putting it to the test. On such occasions he was an awful sight to behold. He foamed at the mouth and rolled his eyes. His jaws were a nest of teeth lined with hellish red. A very small dog already on the run was the excuse for the demonstration. Dopey's fury was instantaneous. He lunged after the small creature like a maniac

on four feet. The pursued uttered a despairing yelp and doubled on his tracks. Dopey followed his example with an unpleasant sound of scraping toenails. Unfortunately Dr. Jordan stepped blithely into the picture at this moment. Dopey rounded the clerical legs at great speed and brought his leash against them with terrific force. The sudden shock pulled Tim to the pavement. Dr. Jordan almost immediately emulated his example. As a matter of fact, for a moment it was a neck-and-neck race to see who would hit the sidewalk first. Tim won by a sufficient margin to permit Dr. Jordan to descend heavily upon him. Dopey, suddenly realizing that he was no longer under restraint, sat down abruptly and whimpered. At any moment that small dog might change its mind and return to bite him. In the meantime from beneath the body of the stunned man of God came one of the most convincing and comprehensive expositions of the baser side of the English language that had ever been heard on Springfield Avenue, or on any other avenue, for that matter. All the bitterness and depression pent up in Tim's soul poured out through his throat and crackled venomously in the surrounding air. Even in his dazed condition the Rev. Dr. Jordan was reminded of something. It had to do with the explosion of a gasoline stove. There had been a church supper. The good man shuddered at the memory.

"Well?" came the voice from beneath him, "isn't it about time you were thinking about getting up? Do you like it here? Why not kneel on my body and offer up a prayer?"

The small crowd that had both seen and heard stolidly watched Dr. Jordan struggle to his feet and brush himself off diligently.

"That's right, you big stiff," came spitefully from the pavement. "Leave me here crushed and broken."

Dr. Jordan looked down at the small figure and was human enough to long to kick it completely out of his sight and memory. Two women stepped forward and helped Tim to rise. Then the three of them stood looking at Dr. Jordan.

"Such language," said one of the women.

"Never heard anything like it in all my life," observed the other.

"And from a man of the cloth," put in Tim. "It's not the sort of language one would expect. Dr. Jordan, I'm shocked and surprised. You have overstepped. You have put your foot in it."

"My dear ladies," rumbled Dr. Jordan, his face not unlike a grinning sunset, "I assure you I did not open my mouth. Not a word of anger or condemnation passed my lips. I heard all the terrible things you heard, the unbelievably vile language, and I was shocked to the core."

"Where is that?" inquired Tim.

"Where's what, the core?" asked Dr. Jordan.

"Yes, the core," replied Tim.

"Madam, it is merely an expression," explained the badgered man.

"Well, I don't think it's a very nice expression, I'm sure," replied Tim.

"I agree," said one of the other women. "It's a terrible thing to speak about."

"Why, my dear madam," pleaded Dr. Jordan. "It's the most harmless thing in the world. Let me——"

"We know how harmless it is," the other woman cut in sarcastically. "You'll be telling us next that babies are found in cabbage heads. What a man."

"If you've finished insulting us, Dr. Jordan," said Tim in his most ladylike voice, "we'll be going. I suggest that the next time you see a young woman on the public thoroughfares you'll make some effort to control yourself. In the privacy of one's home I could understand, if not condone, your conduct, but an assault on the main street of the town is short-sighted, to say the least. And do try to elevate your language. It's disgusting."

With this Tim collected Dopey and, with a bright smile at the two ladies, sailed off down the street. Dr. Jordan, standing amid the ruins of a shattered world, looked after him with murder in his heart. As if not knowing what to do with his hands he extended them supplicatingly to the street and

turned helplessly from side to side. He seemed to be looking for someone to whom he could explain the whole ghastly affair, some reasonable, fair-minded person. Then, fearing lest he should go mad in public, he hurried home and turned on the radio at full blast. And under the cover of the resulting din the Rev. Dr. Jordan gave vent to his pent-up emotion. He could not remember all of the words Tim had used while lying on the sidewalk, but those that he did recall, Dr. Jordan made do double service. He concocted words of his own. In his desperation he even resorted to those words and expressions that are usually to be found on billboards, subway posters, and lavatories. Then, having cleansed his soul and unburdened his mind, he turned off the radio, sat down at his desk, and set about preparing his Sunday sermon in almost a cheerful mood.

Tim's last experience of the day was one he would have preferred to avoid. He would have preferred to avoid them all, he now decided, and remain in a state of blessed ignorance.

On his way home from the village, and while he was in the act of cursing Dopey bitterly for his hypocritical conduct, he glanced up to find himself looking into the clear, inquiring eyes of Claire Meadows.

"I can tell that you like that dog," Mrs. Meadows remarked unsmilingly, "otherwise, with all you seem to have against the beast, you would not be associating with it."

"This dog is a vice, like drugs," replied Tim. "The animal is so darned useless I actually feel sorry for it."

"Come home and have some tea," said Mrs. Meadows, in a surprisingly comforting voice. "You've a desperate light in your eye. I'm a pretty desperate woman myself."

She took Tim by the arm, and reluctantly he allowed himself to be led to the home of Claire Meadows.

"But I forgot," said the woman suddenly. "You might lose your reputation if you were seen on the streets with me."

"Listen," Tim declared quite earnestly, "I haven't enough reputation left to dust a fiddle with. And I don't give a damn about this town. I'd like to blow it up."

"That would avail you little," said Claire Meadows. "There are oodles of other towns like this filled with almost exactly

the same sort of persons. All over the world there are towns like this. You can't escape them."

"Then I will ignore them," replied Tim resolutely.

"If they let you," said Claire cryptically. "But they won't. These towns want to know. They insist on knowing, and they generally find out sooner or later. They look for the worst."

Over a cup of tea in Claire Meadows's pleasant drawing room Tim broke down. Perhaps it was the dreamlike memory of another and happier occasion that did it. What it was he never quite knew, himself. He just found himself talking, and he didn't trouble to stop.

"I'm going to have a baby," he announced in a deep voice.

"That's nice," said Claire easily. "I wish I had mine."

"Did you ever have a baby?" asked Tim with awakened interest.

Mrs. Meadows nodded slowly and looked at Tim with unseeing eyes.

"I had a baby once," she said in a low voice. "A perfectly good baby. A little girl with sleepy eyes. She used to sigh so fatly."

"Did the little baby die?" asked Tim gently.

"No," she answered, with a hard note in her voice. "He took her with the divorce. She was old enough to go then. They said I was unfit. The law can say a lot of things it really doesn't mean. But they hurt for all that."

"Did you experience much trouble having this baby?" Tim inquired delicately.

Claire Meadows raised her eyes to heaven.

"Don't ask," was all she said.

The calm moderation of the woman chilled Tim's last hope. It lay cold against his heart. It was not so much what she had said as what she had left unsaid, what she had intimated, the awful things implied. In his self-absorption he forgot about Claire Meadows's baby and thought only of his own prospective one.

"But I'm not what I seem," he said haltingly.

"None of us is," replied Claire Meadows.

"I shouldn't be having this baby by rights," he went on. "You see, I'm a man at heart."

At this surprising statement, Claire Meadows sat up and looked penetratingly at Tim.

"You do talk like a man," she said at length.

"And I think like a man," added Tim.

"But seemingly you're not a man," the woman replied.

"It's a sort of yes-and-no proposition," Tim explained. "I don't function like a man, and now I'm in this terrible condition. Everybody says I'm going to die." Tim's voice grew shaky. "I haven't written my damn book yet," he added, "and now I guess I never will."

"Come over here," Claire's voice commanded.

She took Tim in her arms and made him comfortable. After she had heard his strange story she sat back and appeared quite charmed.

"I've always believed in magic," she remarked at last, "but I never knew it actually happened. After what you've told me almost anything is possible. I might get my own baby back. Are you sure you're not dreaming this?"

"I don't know," said Tim. "It seems like a dream."

"And you simply must not pay any attention to what other women say," continued Claire Meadows. "Childbirth is not easy under the most ideal circumstances, but it's not nearly so bad as the majority of women make out. After all, I don't blame them a bit. All men think that women exaggerate, so in order to give them an approximate idea of the truth women really do have to exaggerate. It's a vicious circle."

Presently Tim left. He was feeling greatly comforted. Claire Meadows had done it.

"You know," she said, following him to the door, "I've often longed to establish contact with a man's mind without having his body constantly interrupting the conversation. This is the first time I've had that pleasure."

It was Tim's grin that appeared on Sally's lips.

That night he related to Sally the experiences of the day. She was especially edified by his encounter with the Rev. Dr. Jordan. Later, while Tim was writing the next day's copy

assignment, he sent her to the village to search for an avocado. He had yearnings.

"Here's your damned alligator-pear," she said an hour later. "I hope to God it bites you."

"What a way to speak to a person in my condition," replied Tim, delicately elevating his eyebrows.

Chapter XI. No Job for a Lady

SALLY'S POSITION IN THE OFFICE WAS BECOMING INCREASINGLY more difficult. There were times when she was called upon to dash off pieces of copy on the spur of the moment. She grew to dread these sudden demands on her depleted supply of inspiration. The results of her best efforts were usually quite unsatisfactory. There was no Tim in the offing to call upon for assistance. She was forced to rely on her own vast inexperience. What did she know, poor girl, about drop forges, lubricating oils, Never Flap union suits, and a number of other unsympathetic, not to say inimical, products thirsting for popularity through the medium of advertising? She was beginning to crack under the strain of the situation into which Mr. Ram had plunged her, and she, too, cursed that colorful little gentleman from the bottom of her heart. Grudgingly she admitted to herself that the business of being a good provider for a family even of two was not as easy as it had once seemed. There were times when she even wished that she could change positions with Tim and do things about having a baby. He was making an awful mess of it, getting himself all worked up and nervous.

All afternoon she had been laboring uninspiredly on one of these rush-copy assignments when a person no less than Mr. Gibber himself saved her. He summoned her to his presence and spoke with unwonted feeling.

"Willows," he said, "Tom Burdock is in the city and we can't get him out. He's our best client. We have to handle him with gloves. A club would be better, but, as I say, he is our

most important and profitable client. Already he has both physically and morally shattered three of our most hardened account executives. It is now your turn—your opportunity, I should say. Get Tom Burdock out of town and you are a made man here. The sky is the limit. Stick to him. Don't let him get out of your sight. Here's two hundred dollars. Give it to him and get him to sign this slip. Draw as much money as you need yourself. It's on the house. Now, Willows, I don't hold with excessive drinking. Never have. But this is an exceptional case. I feel that any steps you see fit to take to get Tom Burdock on a train headed back home will be fully justified. After all, his wife and children might like to see what he looks like. Use drugs if necessary. And remember, he is our most important client. Be smooth, be tactful and—you know—be convivial. Above all, stick to your man."

Sally may live to witness the stars go mad in their orbits, volcanoes gush forth ill-tempered jets of flame, and the Empire State Building stand jauntily on its head, but more vivid, more demoralizing than any of these manifestations will be the memory of her attempt to stick by Tom Burdock.

He was a large, jovial man with a crop of defiant red hair, a livid face, and an all-pervading thirst. She found him sitting on the bed in his hotel room in the attitude of Rodin's Thinker. When she gave him the two hundred dollars, the great man changed his position and looked upon Sally as if she were a messenger from on high. Immediately thereafter he began to distribute largess to the hotel staff. As a result of this generous conduct numerous flasks and bottles began to make their appearance, and as a direct result of their arrival Tom Burdock was soon back where he had been on retiring the previous evening. It was in this exalted state that it occurred to him it would be a benevolently paternal act to buy a doll for his youngest daughter. As long as Tom Burdock could think he acted, and even after he had ceased to think he still continued to act. Sally found herself in the street sticking to the great man.

"Willows," he declared, "I'm going to buy me a doll—for my youngest daughter—it will get her on my side. When I get

back home I'll need every friend I have on earth as well as many who have indubitably gone to hell."

Cheered by this harking back to home, Sally encouraged him in his mission. When they left the department store she found herself carrying the largest and most lifelike baby doll she had ever seen. The thing even felt like a baby as she carried it along the street, Burdock, in his impatience with details, having stripped off the wrapping, which like all wrappings had untidily come undone. The doll attracted no little attention and comment on the part of passing pedestrians, and it was this that started the trouble. Mr. Burdock conceived the idea that Sally was carrying the doll all wrong.

"Here, give me that doll," he said, looking critically at Sally. "I'll show you how to carry a baby. Watch me."

Not only did Sally watch him, but also everyone else on the street. Burdock's method of carrying the doll was brutal in the extreme. With one huge hand he seized the lifelike object round its neck and dragged it along after him, its legs dangling gruesomely against the pavements. In spite of her knowledge that Mr. Tom Burdock's burden was as inanimate as a doll could be, Sally was unable to repress a slight shudder of revulsion on seeing it thus handled. The fact that at home Tim was busily if reluctantly evolving a real baby did not help matters. Sally was sensitive about babies.

They had not progressed very far when they were accosted by an indignant but unfortunately myopic old lady who informed the genial Mr. Burdock that if he persisted in subjecting an innocent child to such inhuman treatment she would be forced to call a policeman. The situation seemed to tickle Tom Burdock. He proceeded to make it worse.

"Innocent child!" he exclaimed huskily as he grabbed the doll's neck with two powerful hands and began to choke it before the horrified eyes of the old lady. "Innocent child!" he repeated. "I like that. Why, this child has the heart of a fiend, you old owl. It won't go to sleep. It won't do a damn thing. I'm bored to tears with this baby and, madam,"—Tom Burdock lowered his voice—"I'm going to strangle it to death before your very eyes. Observe."

The old lady's piercing scream collected a crowd with such startling swiftness that Sally gained the impression its individual members must have been rehearsed in their parts and had been merely awaiting the old lady's signal to rush into action. In spite of Mr. Gibber's adjurations to stick to Tom Burdock, Sally felt strongly inclined to remove herself as speedily as possible from the neighborhood of the Nationwide Advertising Agency's most important client and to stay removed. Above the crowd Mr. Burdock towered, the doll raised aloft, its head shaking so violently that it gave every appearance of life and animation.

"I'll murder the child," gritted Burdock. "It's illegitimate, anyway. Better dead than alive."

The doll was moving so rapidly now that it was virtually impossible for the spectators to ascertain its true character. Several men covered their eyes with their hands in an endeavor to blot out the unnerving sight. The women stared as if fascinated and the old lady screamed.

"Gord," breathed a girl to her escort. "The poor kid must be used to such treatment if it doesn't even cry."

"Can't very well get used to a thing like that," answered the man. "By the time you do you're damn well done in."

Sally began to fear that the most important client was beginning to lose his head, to take his part too seriously. He was laughing like a demon and his eyes were flashing wildly. The success of his acting had overstimulated him.

"Innocent child!" he cried, addressing himself to the crowd. "Ha! See what I do with it. I choke it. I twirl it. Thus."

And Mr. Burdock began to twirl the doll above his head.

"I can stand very little more of this," gasped a well-dressed gentleman. "I'm not very fond of children myself, but such treatment of a mere baby is going altogether too far."

"Stick out your tongue at the lady," said Tom Burdock. "Go on, stick it out, you black-hearted brat."

"He's gone mad," ejaculated a woman. "He doesn't know what he's doing. For God's sake get a policeman."

But already several members of the crowd were beginning to

suspect the true state of affairs. They smiled with tolerant amusement and waited for further developments.

"Are you a friend of this gentleman?" a man asked Sally.

"Merely a business acquaintance," Sally replied hastily.

"He's more than that," cried Mr. Burdock, who had overheard the question. "He's the father of this baby. He refuses to give it a name."

"Then why don't you do something about it?" the old lady demanded of Sally. "Are you willing to see your own baby murdered?"

"Yes," replied Sally in a voice that carried conviction. "I don't want it. Small children disturb me. And anyway, I can't stop this madman. He might take it into his head to twirl me about. That would never do."

"Oh!" exclaimed the old lady. "I've never experienced such cowardice and brutality in all my born days. Why doesn't a policeman come? Why don't you men do something?"

She kicked Mr. Burdock sharply on the shin, and that gentleman uttered a howl of rage.

"Stop that!" he shouted. "You're only making matters worse for the baby. I'll snap the thing's head off."

"Don't worry, lady," a spectator said soothingly to the old woman. "It's not alive."

"Do you mean to say it's dead?" she asked. "Then that means murder. And every one of you are accessories before the fact for looking on and letting him do it."

And with this she lifted up her voice and called piercingly for the police. Presently Patrolman Riley sweated a path through the crowd. At the sight of the policeman Tom Burdock redoubled his efforts. The doll fairly sizzled in frantic revolutions.

"What's going on here?" demanded Riley. "What's all the trouble?"

Apparently the members of the crowd decided to let the officer find out for himself.

"Arrest everyone," said the old lady. "Officer, they're all in it. They've let this madman murder a baby before their very eyes. And there's his friend, the father of the child."

Sally stood quakingly under the accusing eyes of the policeman, but at this moment a diversion occurred. The doll detached itself from one of its legs and described a jangling arc in the air. For a moment it poised over an open manhole in which some laborers were further confusing the electric system of the city, then dropped from sight within. Officer Riley, abandoning his tactics of tolerant inquiry, sped after the doll and followed it down into the manhole. For a moment Mr. Burdock stood looking at the leg in his hand.

"Can't do anything with that," he said at last. "Perhaps a cannibal's daughter might like it, but not mine. Here, old lady, you can have it as a little souvenir of your first murder."

He thrust the leg into the hand of the shrinking old lady and, breaking through the crowd, hailed and entered a taxi. Sally stuck to him.

A few minutes later Officer Riley emerged from the manhole with a disgusted expression on his face and a disheveled doll in his arms. He approached the old lady and shook the bedraggled object under her nose.

"Here's your murdered baby," he snarled. "I've a good mind to run you in for making a fool of the law." He looked about for Mr. Burdock. "Where's he gone?" he demanded. "Did you let that man escape?"

"I couldn't stop him," the old lady faltered.

With a cry of rage the officer dashed the doll to the sidewalk and shouldered his way through the grinning crowd.

"Move on, the lot of you," he shouted, "or I call for the patrol wagon."

Slowly the crowd dispersed, leaving a bewildered old lady peering down at the doll lying crumpled at her feet.

Back at the hotel Sally was sitting on the bed and seriously considering Mr. Burdock, who was soothing himself with a bottle. She realized he presented a problem that would require some stiff solving. With the abandoning of the doll the man had severed the one tie he seemingly had with his home. She had an overnight job on her hands and a pregnant husband at home impatiently awaiting her return. Mr. Gibber had told her to

stick to Tom Burdock. Her job depended on the success of her sticking powers. She would have to telephone to Tim.

"Willows," said Mr. Burdock from his easy chair, "we know all about how to buy a doll, but we're not so good at getting it home. I think I'll have the next one sent."

"I would," agreed Sally. "To the Aleutian Islands, for instance."

Disgustedly she rose from the bed and put in a call for Tim. When she heard his familiar voice coming to her over the wire she followed her natural instincts and spoke to him as a wife speaks to a husband—that is, as she speaks at times.

"Oh, Tim, darling," she called in a soft, feminine voice. "Yes, dear, of course, this is Sally. And I won't be home to-night. No, not to-night. Don't use such terrible language. It's Mr. Burdock. Yes, yes, dear. Tom Burdock, a client. What's that? A what? Oh, Tim, he's a perfect dear. Yes, simply sweet. You understand. Will you miss me, old thing? That's nice. Good-bye. Take care of Baby. It's a big thing. Of course not. I don't mean Baby."

When Sally turned back to Mr. Burdock he was looking at her with a very peculiar expression in his eyes, a mixture of fear and suspicion.

"I always call my husband Tim," she said rather pointlessly, becoming confused herself for a moment.

"But I thought your name was Tim," Tom Burdock replied.

"That's right," said Sally. "We call each other Tim just for the fun of the thing."

It was Mr. Burdock's turn to become confused. He scratched his mop of red hair and looked consideringly at Sally. He failed to see just where the fun of the thing came in.

"Well," he said at last, "I guess the best thing for us to do would be to take a little drink." Then he suddenly elevated his voice and looked archly at Sally. "Do you drink, dear?" the great man lisped. This was followed by a roar of drunken laughter. Tom Burdock was under the impression that at the moment he was hugely amusing. Not so Sally. Quite cheerfully and without compassion she could have poisoned the man.

Chapter XII. Sticking to Mr. Burdock

AS THE EVENING ADVANCED, SALLY'S OPINION OF MR. BURDOCK was not favorably revised. The man was a cosmic consumer of strong drink. Sally would not have objected to this entirely forgivable weakness had the gentleman confined his indulgence to himself. Tom Burdock was not that way. Never had been. He insisted on others drinking. He forced vile libations on Sally. What had once eaten the enamel off bathtubs now got busily to work on the linings of their respective stomachs. They attended the performance of a play the name and meaning of which neither of them was ever able to remember. They slumbered disreputably through two acts and one intermission. Finally they were escorted to an exit by a contingent of ushers who bade them godspeed as they stood in the street wearily supporting each other while they strove to accustom their smarting eyes to the kaleidoscope of Broadway. To Sally's way of thinking, the street had gone mad. Tom Burdock seemed to be trying to return to sleep by resting the upper half of his body on her head. Unsympathetically she moved away. Mr. Burdock followed. His mind was consumed with one idea to the exclusion of all others. He must get some sleep. For sleep he would commit every crime on the calendar and if necessary think up a few new ones. Sally was of a like mind.

Even then all might have gone well for the ill-matched pair had not an unemployed baker by the name of Joe Clark allowed himself to be struck down by a taxicab. The collision looked more serious than it proved to be. By the time the ambulance arrived all that remained of the erstwhile baker was a battered hat. The man himself had washed his hands of the whole unpleasant incident. After roundly cursing the spot where Joe Clark had once lain, the ambulance surgeon hastened to a nearby cigar store while the driver returned to his seat and

followed with hopeful eyes the frantic leaps of an elderly gentleman who seemed determined to make up for the delinquency of the baker by hurling his own frail body beneath the wheels of as many automobiles as would accept him.

The sight of an empty and comfortably appointed ambulance presented itself to Tom Burdock as a God-given opportunity. As has already been stated, Mr. Burdock continued to act long after he had ceased to think. He did so in this instance. With the confidence born of a fixed idea he climbed into the ambulance and disappeared from sight beneath a blanket. Realizing the futility of any attempt to remove the body of the monolithic creature, Sally did the only thing left for her to do under the unprecedented circumstances. She followed him into the ambulance and sought the protection of another blanket. In the cozy darkness of the compartment Tom Burdock was chuckling like a well-disposed percolator.

"Willows," he said, in a subdued voice, "isn't this great? Wonder what they'll do when they find us in here."

"Quite a lot," replied Sally. "Even more than enough."

"I guess they'll do plenty," Mr. Burdock agreed. "You'd never have thought of a thing like this."

"Never," retorted Sally. "And I wish to God you hadn't. All I can think of is the vast quantities of dead men who have from time to time occupied the same spot in which I am now lying—probably the same blanket."

"No doubt about it," whispered Burdock. "I daresay this ambulance has had its fill of corpses and mangled bodies!"

"A nice place you select for a pleasant nap," observed Sally.

"The way I feel," replied Mr. Burdock, "I could sleep cheek and jowl with a corpse itself."

"You almost are," breathed Sally.

Further conversation was halted by the arrival of the surgeon. He swung himself into the back seat of the ambulance, looking back at the lights of Broadway. Gradually a peculiar sensation took possession of the man. He glanced into the body of the car and received the distinct impression that the blankets had come unrolled and were quivering as if with sup-

pressed mirth. The possible significance of what he saw was not reassuring. Blankets that quivered of their own volition had no place in the general scheme of things. The young surgeon was not elated.

For a long minute he sat considering the blankets with apprehensive eyes, then, opening his bag, he produced a flask which he applied to his lips. Placing the flask beside him on the bench, he returned to the objects of his contemplation. This time it seemed to him that the blankets were threatening to lose control of themselves and to become wildly hysterical. Were those strange, gurgling sounds of human origin or were his eyes and ears playing tricks on him—dirty tricks, at that? He gazed down a long street and thought of other things. He thought of an old man who had died in that ambulance the previous evening because he, the surgeon, had cynically mistaken acute starvation for sordid alcoholism. True, the old man's breath had smelled strongly of bad whiskey, but so did nine out of ten breaths along Broadway. Had the spirit of this hungry old man returned to taunt him with his neglect? The surgeon reached for his flask and was electrified to find it gone. Gurgling noises continued to issue from the blankets. Without further delay he called to the driver to stop; then he climbed up beside him. The blankets could have the entire ambulance for all he cared. Blankets that quivered were bad enough, but blankets that drank whiskey were obviously out of the question. And, anyway, the investigation of occult phenomena was none of his business. He'd leave that to the cranks before he became one himself.

"Get more fresh air up here," he explained to the driver. "Back there the gasoline fumes from the streets are stifling."

"Maybe that's what gets the best of your customers, Doc," suggested the driver. "Most of 'em seem to pass out en route."

Having no desire to be reminded of the high rate of mortality suffered by his customers, the surgeon made no comment and the drive was finished in silence.

Four powerful attendants were awaiting the surgeon's bidding.

"What did you catch to-night, Doc?" one of them inquired.

"Look in the back and see," replied the surgeon with simulated indifference.

They looked in the back and saw. What they saw was in no wise startling. Since the advent of prohibition they had grown accustomed to such sights. Two well-dressed gentlemen were sleeping peacefully and comfortably on the floor of the car. Beside them was the surgeon's flask. The surgeon, himself, unable to restrain his curiosity, and fortified by the presence of others, looked long and hatefully upon the oblivious bodies. His whiskey must have been the last straw. Both Sally and Mr. Burdock had gently passed out. A look of profound trouble clouded the driver's eyes.

"I'll swear to God the pair of them were born fully dressed in there," he protested, peering over the surgeon's shoulder. "We didn't pick up one body, let alone two."

Acid bitterness then entered into the young surgeon's soul. The ethical compulsions of his high vocation vanished from his mind. To him those two still bodies were not human. They were things to be made to suffer both physical and mental anguish. He spoke confidentially and persuasively to the attendants. Those stalwart worthies nodded with unqualified approval and did all that was required.

Some hours thereafter Tom Burdock swam back to consciousness through the alcoholic waves that were beating against his brain. He found himself cold, unreasonably and clammily cold. Removing the sheet from his head, he discovered that everything else also had been removed. "Strange," he thought numbly, "I seem to have crawled into bed mother-naked. Wonder where Willows is." He reached for the night lamp but was unable to find it. Then he sat up and looked about him. What he saw was not reassuring. Along the opposite wall were numerous rows of large drawers. Certainly this was not his hotel bedroom. "Might have barged into the linen closet," he reflected, "and gone to sleep there. Damn fool thing to do." Then in the dim light he noticed a number of slablike tables upon which sheet-draped figures were apparently sleeping the unstirring sleep of the weary.

"I've got it now," he decided. "We're in some sort of a Turkish bath. They've taken all our clothes and now they're freezing us to death."

He let himself down from the table and started out to search for his friend. At that moment two gray-clad figures came swinging into the room and marched up to one of the large drawers. Mr. Burdock modestly shrank down behind a table and observed a scene that was anything but happy, although his faculties were still too atrophied to comprehend the full significance of what he saw.

The two men opened one of the drawers and snapped the body of an unpleasant-looking man into view. This they unceremoniously deposited in a basketlike arrangement.

"Well, here's the last of this beauty," remarked one of the men, as if the final removal of the beauty were a pleasure that had been long deferred.

"He's still so full of slugs he's as heavy as a graven image," complained the other.

Laying violent hands on the basket, the two gray-clad figures half dragged and half carried it through another door.

"What a tough joint we picked out," Mr. Burdock observed to himself. "First they make a guy sleep in a drawer, then they drag him off in a basket. Wonder what they meant by that bit about slugs. Sounded sort of bad to me."

His growing feeling of solitude and uneasiness gave him the temerity to lift the end of the sheet from the figure on the table behind which he had been crouching. He found himself confronting a pair of large, aloof-looking feet.

"Can't be Willows' feet," he decided, delicately recovering the feet and moving to another table. "I'll try this sheet, but maybe they tucked him in a drawer."

This effort was rewarded by a glare from two pale, malevolent blue eyes set in a dead white face decorated with a flowing beard. Mr. Burdock, after one look, hastily dropped the sheet. This Turkish bath evidently drew its customers from the very scum of society.

"I beg your pardon, brother," he mumbled. "I was looking for my friend."

He realized it was rather improper to be going about uncovering naked strangers, and was fully prepared to have this man snap erect and tell him to go to hell with his friend. He was not prepared, however, for the silence that greeted his apology. Perhaps the man had not heard. He'd try him again. Once more he diffidently raised a corner of the sheet and looked down. A person did not usually go to sleep with his eyes wide open, no matter how tired he felt. There was something in the very immobility of the figure that arrested Tom Burdock's attention. Very gently, very reluctantly, he edged in a finger and touched the man's cold face. Mr. Burdock's hand flipped back like a frantic fish leaping from a lake. He stood there petrified, frozen to the marrow by the shock of a ghastly realization.

"Oh, my God," he breathed at last, "I'm a dead man. We're all dead men. That bit about the slugs. I see it all now. The ambulance. We died on the way. That stuff in the doctor's flask did the trick. It killed us."

In his morbid mental condition it was not at all difficult for Mr. Burdock to persuade himself that this was the only rational explanation of his predicament.

"Wonder what poor Willows looks like," he mused as he moved to the next table.

Idly he lifted the sheet and glanced down. The grinning face of a Negro seared his eyeballs. The sheet dropped from Mr. Burdock's nerveless fingers and blotted out the terrible sight.

"Dear me," he quavered, in his fright forgetting how to curse. "Oh, dear, dear me. Oh, goodness. I can't go on with this much longer. How awful everything is."

At this inauspicious moment the sheet on the table on the other side of Mr. Burdock was seized with a sudden convulsion. Tom Burdock had often heard of a person's jaw dropping under the stress of some terrible fright or confrontation. He had never believed it, however. People did not really go about dropping their jaws. In the whole course of his life he had never seen a single jaw drop. But now as he stood looking at that wildly thrashing sheet he had occasion to alter his opinion. His own jaw swung open like a gate that had been roughly kicked.

His eyes became two glassy points of fear. What horror was he now about to witness? When Tim Willows's head finally emerged from the sheet, Tom Burdock drew a quivering breath and snapped his jaw back into place.

"Where are we?" asked Sally, in a high tremulous voice which even in his dazed condition Mr. Burdock found somewhat incongruous.

"Take it easy, old man," he said in a funereal voice. "Pull yourself together. I fear we're all dead."

"Dead?" repeated Sally. "Why, you're not dead. You don't even look sick."

"I know," replied Burdock bleakly. "It must be like that. All around us lie the dead. Some of us are in drawers."

"You're not in drawers," said Sally, not looking at the great man. "Get a sheet and wrap it round you."

Absently Mr. Burdock plucked a sheet from a nearby table. In so doing he neatly unveiled the body of an oriental ax victim. Sally took one swift look, then crumpled beneath her sheet.

"Has it gone?" came her muffled voice. "What a sight!"

"It will never go," said Burdock hollowly. "It will be dragged away in a basket."

"Oh, dear God," moaned Sally, hoping to curry favor. "Do they make picnics out of us?"

"No," continued Burdock, now thoroughly enjoying his misery. "After that comes the ground—the earth. Parts of us go in bottles, perhaps."

"Well, we'll make a couple of powerful quarts," Sally could not help observing.

She ducked out from under the sheet and looked curiously about her.

"I thought it was a Turkish bath," intoned Tom Burdock, "but it turned out to be a morgue."

"From the frigidity of the temperature," said Sally, "I should say we've missed hell by several degrees."

"You shouldn't talk like that, Willows," Mr. Burdock mournfully remonstrated. "This may be merely a moment of transition—the pause before the plunge."

So far as the plunge was concerned the words of Tom Burdock were singularly prophetic. An aged man came into the room, gave one appalled look at the two strange figures, then hurriedly withdrew.

"There're a couple of resurrections in there," he told the doctor, "and they're raising hell with our morgue."

The doctor received this startling announcement with a smile of malicious glee. A few minutes later four large attendants filed briskly into the morgue and roughly apprehended both Sally and Mr. Burdock. Then came the plunge. They were transported through leagues of space and violently deposited in two tubs of ice-cold water.

"The final plunge," gasped Sally as the water closed over her head.

Mr. Burdock's amazement and indignation knew no bounds. Sally had reached that stage whereat nothing really surprised her. Dead or alive, she was still sticking to her man.

The bath over, a couple of strange-looking garments were flung in their faces.

"My God," chattered Tom Burdock, distastefully examining the article in his hands. "The things they can't think of doing to you in a place like this! Now what do you suppose this damn thing is? It looks pretty desperate to me."

"Put it on. Put it on," snapped one of the attendants. "Can't you see we're waiting?"

"How many poor souls have met their God in mine?" demanded Sally, at which Mr. Burdock's face went white.

"Plenty," said the attendant.

"It's still quite good," replied Sally.

"I can't do it," gasped Mr. Burdock. "Have men actually died in these things?"

"Suffered and died," said the attendant. "And if you don't get into yours you'll find yourself in a strait-jacket."

"If it's a new one," observed Mr. Burdock, as he struggled into the uncouth sleeping garment, "I think I might prefer even that."

"Now, how do we look?" asked Sally after they had slipped into the nightshirts.

"Take 'em off," commanded the attendant disgustedly. "You've got 'em on backward."

"But this way seems more logical," suggested Mr. Burdock.

"I'm getting mighty tired of you," said the attendant. "Are you going to do what I say?"

"Sure he is," put in Sally. "Dress pretty for the gentleman, Tom."

The attendant gave Sally a suspicious look. She had spoken in her natural voice, which even Mr. Burdock found difficult to tolerate.

"Don't talk like that," he pleaded, "or you'll be getting us into more trouble."

Once more they were seized upon and hurried down the hall. This time they were thrust into a long ward apparently entirely occupied by the maddest sort of madmen. Wild and alarming noises filled this ward. Some men were cursing in their sleep while others preferred to laugh. The laughing was the harder to bear. Several were singing lustily on their cots, while others troubled the air with a cacophony of hard-driven snores. It was bedlam at its weirdest.

"You don't expect us to sleep in an animal house like this?" demanded Mr. Burdock in a voice of dignified reproof. "Why, damn it, I'm a gentleman."

"We don't care whether you sleep or not," replied the communicative attendant. "You can shout and scream like the others if you feel like it. Everybody's nuts in here."

"What!" exclaimed Tom Burdock. "Do you mean to say you're putting us in with insane people?"

"Why, didn't you know?" asked the attendant. "You're that way yourself. Hope you don't think we'd put you in with normal patients. You're under observation."

"I can't stand it," muttered Mr. Burdock to Sally. "I know I'll never be able to stand it. I'll go mad myself. What humiliation! And this damn silly nightgown all split down the back. That in itself is enough to make a person look and act like a madman."

Not only were they thrown into bed but also strapped down until only their heads could move.

"Well, I never in my life would have thought it possible," said Mr. Burdock, cocking his massive head at Sally. "To be strapped helplessly in bed with a ward full of raving lunatics. Can you imagine it?"

"I don't have to," replied Sally, popping up her head. "I'm experiencing it to the hilt."

"Next time I crawl into an ambulance," groaned Burdock, "I hope to God they shoot me."

"They probably will," said Sally wearily. "They can do anything they want to you in a place like this, especially if you're mad. Do you think you are?"

The great man strained at his bonds.

"Don't," he pleaded. "Don't even suggest it."

"Well, I think I am," went on Sally. "I believe I've lost my reason. First I thought I was dead and now I'm pretty sure I'm not quite all there. I'm glad I'm strapped down or else I might do either you or myself an injury."

Tom Burdock gave her a frightened look and shivered. Perhaps that explained the sudden shiftings of his companion's voice. There was, now that he came to think of it, something rather odd about Tim Willows. No normal man could talk so like a woman.

"I wish we had Mr. Volstead strapped down between us," went on Sally. "He'd make a noble experiment."

A doctor came quietly up to Mr. Burdock's cot and stood looking rather sadly down at its occupant. Burdock returned the man's depressing scrutiny half timidly and half combatively. Suddenly the doctor stooped down and examined the great man's eyes, roughly snapping back the lids.

"Don't do that," complained Burdock. "Damn it, man, you're gouging."

Slowly the doctor rose and sorrowfully he shook his head.

"It's too bad," was all he said.

"What's too bad?" demanded Burdock.

"Gone, clean gone," continued the doctor, as if speaking to himself. "The mind . . . a case for the mad house."

"What do you call this?" asked Sally. "They don't make houses any madder, Doc."

Mr. Burdock's eyes were starting from their sockets. His face was purple from the strain of his efforts to get at the doctor.

"Do you mean to stand there and tell me to my face I'm gaga?" he fumed.

The doctor's face brightened.

"That's it," he replied soothingly. "My good man, you're gaga. Do you like being gaga?"

"You're crazy as a coot," Mr. Burdock managed to get out. "You should be where I am. You're criminally insane, yourself."

"Another sure indication," observed the doctor. "The persecution complex. Thinks everyone's mad but himself. A very sad case."

Inarticulate with rage, Tom Burdock began to whine like a dog.

"Thinks he's a dog now," went on the doctor, then, looking down once more at Mr. Burdock: "Playing wow-wow, old man?" he asked. "What sort of a dog are you?"

The whining turned to a howl of truly animal ferocity.

"Why don't you examine me, too?" Sally inquired of the doctor. "I'm as mad as hell. Much madder than he is. I'm so far gone I think I'm a couple of wow-wows, not to mention a pack of wolves. If I wasn't strapped down I'd stalk myself and then turn at bay and snarl in my own face."

"You're not mad," replied the doctor. "You're merely peculiar. An all too familiar type."

"Now I wonder what he meant by that?" mused Sally as the doctor drifted away. "It had all the earmarks of a nasty crack."

"Willows," said Mr. Burdock weakly, after he had quieted down somewhat, "Julius Cæsar and Napoleon and Alexander the Great and all those famous men would be just as helpless and humiliated as we are if they took away all their clothes and made them wear these silly-looking nightshirts all split down the back, wouldn't they?"

"Sure they would," replied Sally encouragingly. "And that goes for President Hoover, Aimee Semple McPherson, and

Rudy Vallee. Mahatma Ghandi is the only possible exception. He might look quite snappy for him."

"It's so demeaning," continued Mr. Burdock. "They don't give you a ghost of a chance. They strip you of dignity and self-respect and make you look like a fool. They get the moral and physical advantage over you and you can't do a damn thing. It's the worst feeling in the world. No man can look competent rigged out the way we are."

"I've never succeeded in looking like that even in a fur coat," replied Sally. "But it must be hard lines for you, the head of a great concern."

"It is, Willows. It is," said Burdock mournfully. "I don't think I'll ever regain my former self-esteem."

"My own inferiority complex," replied Sally, "has been given a terrific boost. If a worm looked at me severely I'd break down and confess everything."

At this juncture an interne presented himself and gave them what proved to be a sleeping potion, for presently their eyes closed and they fell into an uneasy doze.

Several hours later Mr. Burdock awoke and immediately wished he hadn't. What he saw caused him to shrink within his bonds. He hoped he was still dreaming. He even hoped that the doctor had been right and that he had gone mad. He hoped for any other explanation except the true one. An incredibly aged creature or thing, a face remotely suggestive of a woman, an evil face framed in an unholy nimbus of straggling, gray hair, was peering down into his, peering with the glazed, fixed stare of the demented. In the hand of this apparition was a long kitchen knife. Just above Mr. Burdock's throat the blade was suggestively poised.

"Get up, Jim," croaked the face in a hoarse voice. "Get up at once. It's time ye were rising, man."

Mr. Burdock licked his dry lips and endeavored to speak. No sound came.

"Get up," continued the terrible voice. "Get up, Jim, you hulk of a man."

"My good woman," Tom Burdock gasped. "Nothing would

please me more. I long to get up. I'd give ten years of my life to get up, but unfortunately I can't get up."

"I'll make you get up," grated the old woman, tentatively pricking her victim with the point of the knife.

"But, madam, I'm not Jim," Mr. Burdock protested. "You've made some mistake. I think that man over there calls himself Jim."

"Oh, what a lie!" exclaimed Sally, who had been awakened by the sound of voices. "Don't you believe him, lady. Jim went out to get a drink."

"I'd like a drink," observed the old woman.

"Why don't you go and get one?" suggested Mr. Burdock. "We all want a drink."

"No," said the old woman, once more prodding Burdock with the knife. "You go get the drink."

"Listen, lady," he said very earnestly. "If I could go get a drink you don't think I'd be lying here, do you? I couldn't go get a drink if they were being given away in buckets. I can't even budge."

"I'll make you budge," proclaimed the old lady, growing excited. "Are you going to get that drink before I slit your throat?"

As she prodded the knife into Mr. Burdock her face was working horribly. Unable to stand the situation any longer, he lifted up his voice in one anguished cry for help.

"Pipe down in there," called a gruff voice. "Want another cold bath?"

"Yes," shouted Burdock. "That's it. I want another cold bath. Quick, for God's sake."

"If you don't hurry he'll be bathed in blood," Sally sang out. "We've got a wild woman in here. And she's got the cutest knife—about twelve inches long."

"Come out of there, Maggie," came a bored voice. "Neither one of those guys is your husband. They're just plain bums. Come on and give us that knife and I'll slip you a little drink."

"That's a good girl, Maggie," said Mr. Burdock. "Did you hear what he said? He promised you a little drink. Think of that!"

Evidently Maggie was thinking of that. She seemed undecided. From the knife she looked to Mr. Burdock's unprotected throat. Maybe she could cut it and get the drink, too. A greedy look sprang up in her eyes.

"No, no," said Sally, who had been watching the old woman closely. "No cheating, Maggie. I'll tell."

Mumbling furiously to herself, Maggie turned and hobbled from the alcove.

"Who in God's name can that be?" asked Tom Burdock, the sweat standing out on his face.

"She seems to be the mascot of the troop," observed Sally.

"Well, she certainly gave me the worst fifteen minutes of my life," said Mr. Burdock. "This has been a most unpleasant night. Wish I could go home."

"Do you mean that?" cried Sally.

"If I ever get out of this place alive," replied Burdock with deadly conviction, "that's just where I'm going—home."

"Is that a promise?" asked Sally.

"It's more than a promise," said Burdock. "It's a grim determination."

Sally sighed deeply and let her head sink back to rest.

An orderly appeared and stood at the foot of Mr. Burdock's bed. He was grinning rather apologetically.

"Maggie wasn't premeditated," he said. "We didn't plan Maggie. It was all her own idea."

"She's got some mean ideas, that girl," commented Sally. "Why don't you keep her locked up?"

"Oh, Maggie's perfectly harmless," replied the orderly. "We've had her with us for years. She's a sort of privileged character. She wanders from ward to ward. Nobody seems to mind."

"I mind terribly," said Mr. Burdock. "I most strenuously object to Maggie. She may be a privileged character, but not with my neck."

At an early hour they were unstrapped and fed. Then Tom Burdock was given a heavy flat weight attached to a broom handle, and told to push it up and down the linoleum which ran the entire length of the ward.

"My God," protested Burdock. "This hall is so damned long I don't even see the end of it. I'll drop from sheer exhaustion before I'm halfway through."

"Better send Maggie along with him to keep him from getting lost," suggested Sally.

Without further protest the employer of five thousand souls set off on his long trip. Sally was set to work emptying buckets, a most uncongenial task. Whenever their paths chanced to cross in the course of their humiliating occupations the two friends' expressions were eloquent. They were weary, strained, and disgusted. Sally looked especially wan.

"Would you believe it?" demanded Mr. Burdock. "Me with this damn thing. Pushing it. And in such a get-up."

"I suppose I look quite natural," remarked Sally bitterly.

"You have all your life before you," replied Tom Burdock.

"And a sweet little bit behind," retorted Sally. "You've made history for me, Tom Burdock."

By ten o'clock in the morning both of them were convinced that they had been up an entire day. An attendant flung two bags at them and told them to clear out. Neither one of them ever achieved again such speed in dressing as they did that morning. Even then the operation seemed interminable to them. Both were knotting their neckties as they marched down the hall. Once in the open air they breathed with voluptuous enjoyment. Never had life seemed quite so desirable. A taxi took them to the Grand Central. Sally was taking no chances.

"I'll fix it up with the hotel," she assured Mr. Burdock. "I'll pack your bags myself and see that they're sent along."

"You're a great little scout, Willows," said the large man. "What a time we've had, eh?"

"I've enjoyed every minute of it," Sally replied with a grin. "Every jolly old minute. Wouldn't have missed one of them."

"The same here, you liar," said Mr. Burdock. "We've had a nice, quiet time. Going to tell my wife all about it."

They were standing on the long platform now and Sally was watching Tom Burdock with anxious eyes. A white-jacketed porter stepped out of a Pullman and greeted Mr. Burdock with a dazzling display of even whiter teeth. Mr.

Burdock returned the salutation in his large, friendly style. Evidently he was well known on this line. Sally had no desire to linger over the farewells. She wanted to see her charge disappear into the train and the doors shut against his return.

"Don't forget America's Sweetheart," she told him.

"You mean Maggie?" asked Burdock, with a slight shudder.

"Herself," replied Sally.

"Never," said Mr. Burdock. "I'm going in now and collapse in a chair. Do I look all right?"

"Surprisingly well, considering what you've been through."

So departed Mr. Burdock from the city that had so disastrously misunderstood his playful intentions. Sally stood on the platform until the train pulled out, then she hurried to the nearest telephone and made a full report to a congratulatory Mr. Gibber. An hour later she caught a local to Cliffside, hoping there to enjoy a much-needed rest. She never did. Not on this occasion, at any rate.

The excitement started when she was wearily crossing Springfield Avenue on her way home from the station. Speaking accurately, the excitement must have started elsewhere. It merely reached its highest point of activity in and around the spot where Sally was standing. It was first brought to her attention by a bitter fusillade of bullets and the sharp reports of an exceedingly loquacious revolver. As inured as she had become to the unexpected, Sally was nevertheless somewhat disturbed. She was more so when she saw Mr. Carl Bentley, clad in a dripping wet union suit, approaching her at great speed. Close behind Mr. Bentley, and covering ground much too rapidly for a prospective mother, came the metamorphosed Tim, diligently pumping an old service automatic. And close behind Tim were two leaping state troopers, their faces eloquently expressing incredulity and determination. It must have been a moment of supreme humiliation for Mr. Bentley, but the Don Juan of the suburbs seemed to have tossed all considerations of shame and modesty to the winds as being impediments to flight.

Catching sight of a person he erroneously believed to be the

husband of his murderously inclined pursuer, Mr. Bentley crouched behind Sally and pleaded for protection.

"A terrible mistake," he managed to get out between gasping breaths. "She suddenly went mad. Speak to her, Mr. Willows. I'm too young to die."

This settled Mr. Bentley's hash forever with Sally.

"You were never too young to die," she told the cringing man. "You should never have been allowed to get as far along as you have."

Tim, held firmly by the two state troopers and talking loosely about his purely hypothetical honor, was hustled up to the spot.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Willows," said one of the troopers to Sally, "I'll have to ask you to accompany your wife and this—this——" The trooper seemed to be having difficulty in classifying Carl Bentley. Tim helped him out.

"Nasty-minded craven," he supplied, then added several unladylike epithets.

"Madam!" said the trooper reprovingly.

"To hell with you," snapped Tim. "If the two of you hadn't butted in this bum would have been a corpse by now."

"May I ask what all the shooting's about?" Sally put in mildly.

"That's what we want to know," said the other trooper. "Come on down to the police station and we'll try to find out."

"If you want to know," remarked Tim, "it's all about this damned honor of mine."

He slipped an arm through Sally's and winked wickedly up at her. Sally was undecided whether she would prefer to lose her honor privately or her reputation in public. Ahead of them, held with unnecessary brutality, Carl Bentley in his dripping union suit proceeded down the street.

In, virtually, any part of the civilized world this little procession would have occasioned comment. In Cliffside it did more than that. Even to this day it is a subject of conversation that increases in dramatic intensity with the passing of the years. Carl Bentley's dripping union suit is still as fresh in the

memory of those who had been privileged to witness the incident as when that unfortunate gentleman had first sprinted grotesquely down Springfield Avenue.

Chapter XIII. The Baiting of Mr. Bentley

MR. RAM SHOULD NEVER HAVE DONE THE THING HE DID. BUT, then, one never can tell about Egyptians. Especially with old Egyptians. With new Egyptians it's different. Nobody knows just what a new Egyptian is. One can't very well dig up a new Egyptian. Old Egyptians are much easier to get to know. They seem to have had a quaint idea of humor. Like Mr. Ram. There was no sense in giving Tim Willows the body of a woman and leaving him the mind of a man. It was a flagrant example of perverted sorcery, and just what one would expect from an old Egyptian, an old and cynical Egyptian deeply steeped in all the more exasperating phases of the black arts.

One may say that in the case of Mr. Ram there were extenuating circumstances. Perhaps there were. No one enjoys less than an old Egyptian being forced to listen to the constant bickerings of a married couple. An occasional row is diverting, but a daily diet of recrimination and vain regrets wears on one's nerves and saps one's moral fibre. Even at that Mr. Ram might have tried something a little less drastic. For example, he could easily have made Sally dumb and Tim deaf or vice versa. It would not have mattered much just how he went about it. But, seemingly, Mr. Ram did not choose to act reasonably in the matter. Probably he decided that the only way to get these two unreasonable persons to understand him was to be thoroughly unreasonable himself. Either that or he suddenly lost his temper after long years of provocation, and did the first thing that popped into his head. He might have figured it out this way: Give people what they ask for and then wait and see what they make of it. Both Tim and Sally had made a mess of it. But Tim had made a bigger mess of it than Sally. Perhaps a woman is more adaptable than a

man. She must be if there is any truth in the rumor that from a mere rib—an unsightly object at best—she developed into the complicated creature of curves and nerves she represents to-day. You would never catch a man allowing a thing like that being done to him. If the process had been reversed and the rib extracted from Eve's side, that rib would have hemmed and hawed and argued and compromised until there was not a bone left in the poor woman's body. Men are like that. They have a fine sense of dignity. No real man would be willing to run the risk of having his wife turn on him suddenly and cry: "Shut up, you mere rib." A man would not stand for that, but a woman would. A woman will stand for anything so long as she gets the best of the man. Eve did not care a snap of her fig leaf about being Adam's rib, whereas Adam would have put up an awful howl had the tables been turned or the ribs reversed. Eve knew perfectly well that as soon as she got working properly, that is, as soon as she had developed her curves and acquired her nerves Adam would forget all about the rib part of it and try to get familiar. Men are even more like that. In a paroxysm of nervous hysteria she forced the apple on Adam, saying he never liked anything she picked, then with a skillful use of her curves she got the best of him as she had all along known she would even when a mere rib. And that must have been about the way of it. Adam never had a chance. Neither had Tim Willows. Nor Carl Bentley, for that matter. Certainly the latter had no chance at all when he was so ill-advised as to call on one he mistakenly supposed to be the delectable Sally Willows on the same day when that young lady in her husband's aching body was seeing the last of Tom Burdock.

Tim, thoroughly convinced that his condition justified a little self-indulgence, was lolling in bed with his morning paper and a cigar when Mr. Bentley, like the astute snake in the grass he was, telephoned to ascertain if the coast was clear. Tim answered the call in Sally's most affected voice.

"Hello. Who's speaking?" he asked.

"Sally, is that you?" came the low inquiry.

Tim's face darkened, but his tones remained just as dulcet. He had recognized Mr. Bentley's hateful voice.

"Oh, dear," he said vibrantly, emitting the while a cloud of pungent cigar smoke. "It's been ages since I've seen you."

At the other end of the wire Mr. Bentley was beginning to feel better and better. He liked to keep his women feeling that way.

"You said it, baby," he replied, in that whimsically slangy way of his that proved so effective with women. "Is it all right for me to come round now?"

"But Carl, dear," protested Tim, smiling grimly, "baby's still in bed."

"Then I'll hurry right over," said Bentley. "Don't trouble to get up for me."

"What a man!" exclaimed Tim coyly as he viciously jabbed the receiver down on its hook. "I'll make him pay for this," he continued to himself as he sprang from the bed. "By God, I'll make him wish he'd never been born a man. One of these birds who refuses to learn a lesson. All right, I'll teach him. Thinks I'm at work, does he? Ha! I'll make him sweat."

Opening a bureau drawer he examined his automatic to see if it was properly loaded, then, dressing rapidly, he deluged himself with perfume and hurried downstairs.

When Carl Bentley arrived a few minutes later and found his prey already up and dressed, his face eloquently expressed his disappointment.

"You needn't have gone to all that trouble for me," he said. "I've often been received by ladies in bed."

"Especially when their husbands are safely out of the way at their stupid old offices," put in Tim with a wicked smile.

Mr. Bentley smiled back fatuously and approached Tim with carnal intent.

"I took a day off from my office just for this opportunity," he said in a low voice. "Are you going to make it worth while, Sally?"

"What do you think?" asked Tim teasingly, then added to himself, "You low-lived louse, you'll get more than you ever expected in your wildest dreams."

As Bentley's eager arms enfolded him, Tim managed to lock one foot back of that gentleman's heel, then, as if in a frenzy of passion, he hurled himself suddenly against the opposing chest and let gravity claim its own. It did. Carl Bentley went down with a crash, landing painfully on the sharp edge of a footstool. At the same moment Dopey lumbered in from the kitchen and, seeing a man in an apparently helpless condition, immediately attacked him. Bentley emitted feeble cries of fear and suffering as Tim clumsily strove to disengage the gallant dog's teeth from the prostrate man's trousers. Eventually Tim succeeded, but not without leaving a nice big V-shaped rip. Everything was going splendidly. Tim had not counted on the collaboration of Dopey. He appreciated the dog's intervention. Kneeling down by the writhing figure he proceeded to scold it playfully for being so easily thrown off its balance. Carl Bentley's vanity was challenged. He rose weakly from the floor and hobbled over to a chair, into which he tenderly eased his injured torso.

"I know," he complained, "but I wasn't expecting an assault. You pretty nearly ruined me."

"I'm that way," murmured Tim with downcast eyes. "You make me lose my self-control and then I don't know what I'm doing. Anything might happen. You'll have to protect me against myself, Carl dear."

Carl dear had no such intentions, but he did resolve to protect himself a little better against Sally in the future.

"What am I going to do about my trousers?" he asked, looking ruefully at the rip.

"I'll sew that up after you've taken them off," said Tim, then added hastily, "Oh, dear, what have I said? What could I have been thinking about? Do forgive me, Carl. Of course you don't have to take off your trousers."

"But I will if you think it best," replied Mr. Bentley quite willingly.

"I think it best," Tim said decisively.

Before Mr. Bentley had time to reply to this one Tim undulated from the room and mixed a huge cocktail composed of medicated alcohol. He had tried the stuff once himself in a

moment of desperation and as a result had become violently and lingeringly ill.

"Sorry I can't join you," he said enviously when he had returned to Mr. Bentley. "But it's the doctor's orders. I'm off the stuff for a month, maybe longer. I'll just snuggle up close to you and watch you enjoy yourself. If you don't like that cocktail I'll know you don't love me and I'll turn you out of the house."

The doomed man tossed down the proffered cocktail, then his face became a horrid thing to see. It looked all smeared and twisted. Nevertheless, remembering Tim's words about turning him out of the house, he contorted his lips into a grimace of a smile and tried to give the impression he had swallowed wrong. For several moments he feared he was going to strangle to death. His eyes began to rove desperately round in their sockets as he wheezily sought to entice some air down the sizzling reaches of his seared throat.

"Delicious," he said at last in a husky voice, wiping the tears from his eyes. "What do you call the thing?"

"I call it a Rub-down Special," was Tim's proud reply. "It's so soothing inside. Now you can have just one more and then you'll have to be a good boy. I wouldn't think of letting you make love to me if you kept on drinking."

"As a matter of fact," Mr. Bentley stated, "I think I've had about enough already. I don't enjoy drinking alone, and"—here he made a weak attempt to smile alluringly—"I'd much rather make love to you."

"I guess one more won't do you any harm," replied Tim, in a voice just a little too gruff for Sally's. "If you don't take it I'll not like you one little bit."

Once more the crippled hero of many liaisons subjected himself to the brutal punishment of a Rub-down Special, thinking as he did so that whatever favors he received at the hands of his hostess would be well earned indeed. Shortly after the consumption of this second cocktail he faintly asked to be excused for a moment to enable him to brush up a bit. When he dragged himself back to the room Tim had the satisfaction of beholding a wan and haggard Mr. Bentley. The man

sank wearily into a chair and made revolting noises in his throat.

"Did the doctor tell you especially not to drink those cocktails?" he asked after he had rested for a moment.

"Yes," replied Tim innocently. "He said the things would kill me if I kept on drinking them. He claimed I was poisoning myself."

"Can't see that," declared Bentley gamely. "They seem mighty fine to me."

"You're a regular old darling," cried Tim, slapping the enfeebled man so appreciatively on the back that he was forced once more hurriedly to leave the room. This time when he swayingly returned Mr. Bentley was unquestionably not in the pink. Still, he hoped against hope for better things. The fair object of his foul ends seemed to have noticed nothing. It was an odd thing, though, how everything seemed to go wrong whenever he entered the Willows house. There seemed to be a curse on the place. Again he sank into a chair and made some more queer noises, this time apologizing profusely for his little lapses.

"What you need," proclaimed Tim, "is a little fresh air. That's what we both need. I'm going to take my great big beautiful man for a nice walk and after that—ah-ha, what then?"

The great big beautiful man allowed himself to be bundled into his overcoat and pushed with playful vigor out of the front door. In some mysterious manner he missed his footing on the top veranda step and a moment later found himself sprawling at the bottom of the flight. Two stout matrons of Cliffside had the pleasure of witnessing Carl Bentley's grotesque debacle. Too dejected to put up a pretense, he lay on the walk with his head cocked at an awkward angle on the bottom step and looked at the two passing matrons from out of his dim, unseeing eyes. In the back of his throbbing mind a suspicion was growing that all these things could not happen to a man without there being some directing force either human or supernatural behind them. However, the sympathy and consternation so eloquently expressed on the face that Tim was

wearing as he helped the fallen man to his feet dispelled such unworthy doubts.

"We'll go by the river path," decided Tim as he led Mr. Bentley down a side street. "It's so lovely there and quiet, and there are no prying eyes. We'll be quite alone—just you and I and the river."

For some reason the way Tim brought out the words "river" and "alone" made Carl Bentley shudder slightly. He was the sort of person who confined his reading to the most lurid passages of the current novels. Quite naturally he had never made a complete job of Dreiser's two-deck *American Tragedy,* but he did recall the drowning scene, and felt no better for it. His mind had reached that stage of morbidity at which only the most unpleasant eventualities seemed probable.

The success Tim had so far achieved in subjecting Carl Bentley to pain and humiliation had put him in the best of spirits. He felt that if Sally had only been present to witness his various artful dodges his triumph would have been complete. He experienced no compunction for what he had done to Bentley, nor for what he was going to do to Bentley. In fact, he was mildly surprised he had not already murdered the man. As he summed up the score between them he concluded he held a decided advantage over his would-be home wrecker. Once he had almost put an end to his unwholesome activities for all time. Now he was about to repeat the experiment. Tim looked forward to it. Tim Willows was not really a bad man at heart, but when people were mean to him he enjoyed being just a little bit meaner.

There was still a thin coating of ice on the river. The path that ran close to its edge was narrow, slippery, and disagreeable—the last place in the world to select for a walk at that time of year. Tim pretended to enjoy it. Carl Bentley, a little revived by the fresh air, still clung to his fixed idea. He was going to have his will with Sally Willows. How else could he justify to himself the pain and indignities he had already suffered at her hands? Once more he resumed his tentative endeavor. Winding an arm round his companion's waist he slipped and sloshed laboriously along at the side of his intended

victim. In so doing he received a rather unpleasant impression. Sally Willows's waist as he remembered it had been delightfully slim and firm. The same could not be said of it now. It was still firm but most decidedly not slim. In fact, it was almost fat. It was fat. Moodily Bentley wondered if Sally was a secret eater—a greedy woman. It would not have surprised him in the least. She was so strange, so different from other women. The truth of the matter was that Tim's pregnancy was increasing by leaps and bounds. Unaccustomed as he was to pregnancy, especially as applied to his own person, each time he observed his mounting displacement he was freshly indignant with nature and Mr. Ram for the unfair advantage they were taking of him.

"Soon I'll be sitting about the house like a jovial female Falstaff unable to rise without assistance," he had recently complained to Sally.

"Well, you can't eat your cake and have it, too," had been that lady's unfeeling rejoinder.

"If the situation were reversed," Tim had observed, "and you were in my fix I'd be a damn sight more sympathetic with you than you are with me."

"That's because you're not really a woman," she had said. "A woman is rarely sympathetic with another woman for performing her natural functions. She either looks on a prospective mother with envy or considers her extremely careless."

"Well, after all, it's your figure that's being enlarged," Tim had replied.

Carl Bentley was now finding things out for himself. Sally Willows's waist was actually gross. When he attempted to elevate his grip, Tim gave a little scream and halted.

"Let's play clap hands!" he cried girlishly, skilfully maneuvering Mr. Bentley so that he was standing with his back to the river and perilously close to its edge. "My patties are awfully cold."

Without much display of enthusiasm Mr. Bentley extended his large hands and allowed himself to go through the vapid passes of this exceedingly childish game. But if Mr. Bentley was deficient in enthusiasm his companion more than made up

for it. The game, which at its wildest could hardly be called gripping, seemed to stimulate his fair opponent to a frenzy of excitement. So madly did Tim's hands slap and lunge that Carl Bentley began to wonder whether the woman had mistaken boxing for a simple nursery game. At last he found himself wholly on the defensive, busily engaged in warding off blows. A sense of unreality stole over him as he strove to hold his ground. Why should he be standing there, he wondered, permitting this silly thing to go on? Unconsciously he stepped back several paces, seeking a better foothold. He never found it. At that moment Tim broke through his guard and with a cry of innocent glee gave him a violent shove. The game ended abruptly in a crash and a plop. Carl Bentley had found his foothold on the bed of the river. Only his head was visible, but that was quite enough. From the expression on the man's face one would have been led to believe that he was seriously contemplating suicide, whether life still held sufficient promise to make a return to it desirable. Never had Tim beheld such a brooding and disgusted countenance. This was good. He laughed shrilly and hysterically.

"You know," he cried, "you do look a sight. Just like John the Baptist with his head hygienically transferred to ice. Stop moping about and hurry out of there. I'm getting cold standing here on this freezing ground."

"Do the misfortunes of others always strike you in a humorous light?" Bentley demanded.

"Misfortunes, nonsense!" exclaimed Tim. "You just didn't know how to play the game, that's all there is to it. Hurry up and let me help you. I'm simply freezing."

"That's too darned bad," replied Bentley, beginning to chatter a little himself, "but please don't try to help me. You might get all wet. I couldn't bear that."

But Tim insisted on being helpful. In his eagerness he kept getting in Mr. Bentley's way and thwarting his most desperate effort to climb ashore. A dispassionate observer would have gained the impression that a very small woman was grimly endeavoring to prevent a very large man from quitting an ice-

cold river. The dispassionate observer would have been quite right.

In desperation the exhausted and chilled Bentley was forced to drop to his hands and knees and literally to claw his way past the obstructing legs of his rescuer. He fell panting and shivering on the muddy bank, a spent man weary of life and of all that it had to offer.

"Hurry!" cried Tim. "I must get you home and make you strip. It's a lucky thing I was here or you might have been standing there yet."

"If you hadn't been here," replied Mr. Bentley, with the uncivil logic of the wet male, "I wouldn't have been standing there at all."

"Cheer up," continued Tim. "What's a little river between friends?"

"If the river had been between us," declared Mr. Bentley as he struggled to his feet, "it would have been a damn sight safer for me."

"Nonsense," replied Tim. "Don't go on so. You're not the first man who ever fell in a river. Thousands drown every year. Suppose you were a lumberjack."

"I have no intention of ever becoming a lumberjack," retorted Mr. Bentley.

"But that doesn't keep you from supposing you were one, does it?" asked Tim.

"No," admitted the other, "but I can't see how supposing I was a lumberjack is going to make me any warmer or drier."

"It certainly won't make you any colder or wetter, will it?" demanded Tim argumentatively.

"All right," said Bentley desperately. "I'm a lumberjack. What happens now?"

"Very well, then," replied Tim. "Come along. I knew it would be like this."

"Then why did you ever start out?"

"I wanted to make sure. Thought at least we might be able to take a quiet walk without your flopping and splashing about in a river."

Mr. Bentley could not trust himself to reply to this un-

reasonable observation. Instead he gave an outlet to his pent-up emotions by sneezing inartistically all over the adjacent landscape.

When Tim had hauled his visitor home he hustled the dripping creature up to the bedroom preparatory to the last act. Here he made Mr. Bentley strip to his union suit, practically dragging the clothes off the miserable man with his own two hands.

"You wear union suits, I see," Tim remarked as he yanked off Bentley's soaking trousers.

"Yes," chattered Mr. Bentley. "What does Willows wear?"

"Rags," replied Tim. "Old, unsightly rags. He picks up things about the house and tries them on."

"Tough on you," observed Mr. Bentley, his vanity getting the better of him. "I like to look nice this way. A man owes it to himself. Poor Willows. I'll never forget the night when he hid behind the portière."

It was this remark that settled Carl Bentley's fate. Not only was this great oaf laboring under the delusion that he was going to seduce poor Willows's wife, but also he was actually pitying the husband with horrid condescension.

"That tears it," said Tim decisively, in his natural voice.

"Tears what?" asked Bentley, momentarily startled out of his self-satisfaction.

"You'll soon find out," said Tim, walking over to the bureau and producing the automatic. With this lethal weapon held carelessly in his hands he turned on Mr. Bentley and grinned unpleasantly. "Instead of ruining me," he continued, "I'm going to pretty well ruin you. But before I start in I want to let you know that you look simply terrible in that union suit with its tricky little trapdoor arrangement in the back. You make me ashamed of my sex, as undecided as it is at the moment."

Mr. Bentley's amazement as he listened to Tim's voice crisply issuing from Sally's lips mounted to stupefaction. Had it not been for the blue-black automatic covering him he would have been inclined to believe that Sally was playing another trick and not a very nice one at that. The automatic, however,

was altogether too convincing. Try as he would he could not find a laugh in his system sufficiently robust to do away with that disagreeable-looking object. So unnerved was Mr. Bentley that he was not even able to work up the sickest sort of a smile. Recalling his embarrassing experience on the train, he came to the conclusion that the voices of the Willows must have become interchangeable. Tim's voice continued. He was methodically lashing himself into a fury. He fully intended to make himself madder than he had ever been in his life. It would be a fairly easy matter. One short look at Carl Bentley was enough to set him going. A long look was sure to bring on a violent rage.

"You thought I looked so funny hiding behind that portière," he went on. "You'll never forget it, will you?"

Mr. Bentley was far too frightened to become further confused. He made no attempt to answer, but kept his fascinated eyes on that gun.

"Well, here's something else you'll never forget," continued Tim. "Something that will live with you to your dying day." Tim's voice changed suddenly to a note of sharp command. "Unbutton your little trap door," he snapped.

"But," faltered Mr. Bentley, wondering what on earth was in store for him, "that's hardly——"

"There's no buts about it," interrupted Tim. "I have a desire to see it flap as you go. I want everybody to see it flap."

Reluctantly Carl Bentley did as he was told. He felt as if he had been deprived of his last shred of self-respect. He was not only unbuttoned, but also undone.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," observed Tim. "Now about-face and march. Go right down the stairs and directly out of this house. Don't stop or hesitate. I'll be close behind you with this gun. Once in the street walk rapidly but don't try to run. If you do I'll start shooting. Get a move on now, and don't talk back. You can still save your useless life if you do exactly as I tell you. Off you go."

Thus it came about that Mr. Carl Bentley, clad in a dripping union suit not properly arranged in the back, was seen walking briskly along the streets by practically the entire population

of that suburban town. About ten yards behind this arresting figure came Tim Willows. In his hand was an automatic.

Carl Bentley at first endeavored to give the impression of a man walking in a trance or in sleep, but as he neared the more populous quarter of the town his frayed nerves snapped and he incontinently fled. Tim, in spite of the fact that he was running for two, did his best to keep up with the fleeing man. The sight of the flapping trap door added greatly to the pleasure of the pursuit. It was then that the shooting began, which terminated only when Mr. Bentley sought protection behind Sally.

The little party, escorted by the state troopers, proceeded down the street and entered the police station, which also served as the courthouse. As Mr. Bentley was about to go in, one of the troopers rapped him smartly with his club.

"Button that up," said the trooper. "Have you no pride?"

Mechanically Mr. Bentley's fingers began to grope for the button of what Tim had been pleased to call the little trap door.

Chapter XIV. Much Ado About Honor

"WELL, WELL, WELL," DRAWLED SERGEANT DEVLIN, LETTING his pleased eyes dwell ironically on the strange figure of Mr. Carl Bentley. "What have we here?"

"Damned if I rightly know," replied one of the state troopers. "I've never laid violent hands on anything exactly like it since I've been on the force. It's all wet and nasty."

"I shall remember the revolting circumstances when recommending you for promotion," observed the sergeant, returning once more to his rapt contemplation of the miserable object under discussion. "You know," he continued, in his calm, deliberate voice, "I've sat here behind this desk for many a long year and during that time some mighty unpalatable-looking specimens have been dragged in off the streets, but this one is by all odds the queerest—the most difficult to classify as a member of the human race. It's enough to unseat one's

reason." Having delivered himself of this scholarly observation —Sergeant Devlin being an exceptionally well-educated officer —he let his eyes refresh themselves on the figure of one he mistook for a small but none the less appealingly fashioned woman. Suddenly he started and a dismayed expression appeared in his eyes. "Joe," he said to one of the troopers, "what is the little lady doing with that large gun in her hand? That doesn't strike me as being quite prudent. Ladies with revolvers are notoriously irregular. However, it doesn't really matter. Everything connected with this affair seems to be somewhat irregular." Giving the officer addressed as Joe no opportunity to reply, the sergeant resumed his dispassionate scrutiny of Carl Bentley. "Couldn't you have arranged to put a little something on before getting yourself brought before me?" he inquired, with surprising gentleness. "Had it been the lady, now, I would have offered no word of protest, but then I suppose in my job one shouldn't expect too much in the way of amusement." At this point in the officer's monologue it was on Sally's stubble-covered face rather than on Tim's smooth one that the blush of modesty appeared. Tim in his vulgar manner giggled rather indecently. Sergeant Devlin was quick to note the incongruity of these reactions. "Who is that man?" he demanded, inclining his head in the direction of Sally.

"Seems to be the lady's husband," one of the troopers replied.

"He seems to be?" repeated Devlin. " 'Seems' is hardly the word. Either he is or he isn't the lady's husband. However, it doesn't matter. That may be irregular, too."

"We're man and wife," spoke up Sally, with truly lady-like hauteur.

"That could easily be possible," replied Sergeant Devlin, looking more searchingly at the male owner of the female voice, "but which is the man and which is the wife is still a question in my mind. Your attributes seem to have become strangely confused." Once more he turned his attention to Carl Bentley. "You know," he remarked easily to that individual, "your quaint idea of a gentleman's walking attire has placed you in a very unfortunate position, my dear sir. Even

before this obviously involved situation has been made clear to me I feel strongly inclined to charge you with several disgusting offenses."

"I had no opportunity," Carl Bentley protested in a feeble voice. "I was fleeing for my life."

"Was it worth it?" asked the sergeant, with the detached interest of the true skeptic. "I believe things would have worked out better for you in the long run if you had lost your life. Many persons—I don't say all—but many nice-minded persons would rather be found dead than caught the way you are."

"But that woman was trying to murder me," whined the no longer statuesque Mr. Bentley, pointing an accusing finger at the cause of his degradation. "She's a terrible woman, Sergeant. You don't know. There's something strange about her."

A smothered exclamation broke from the undeniably provocative lips that circumstance had thrust on Tim.

"You horrid man!" he cried threateningly. "You just wait until I tell the nice officer all about how you tried to do in my honor. If you'd had your way with me I wouldn't have had enough honor left to dust a fiddle with."

As Sergeant Devlin smiled approvingly on Tim the miserable Mr. Bentley shivered with apprehension. The poor man seemed to realize he had not the ghost of a chance. The sergeant's next remark made assurance doubly sure.

"I can see nothing strange in the lady's conduct," Devlin observed. "I would very much like to murder you myself. Unfortunately duty forbids." He turned graciously to Tim. "Not that it matters much," continued the sergeant, "but did you have any definite reason for wanting to kill this creature, madam, or were you merely trying to perform a public service? I've always been interested in trifles."

"Well, this wasn't any matter to trifle with," said Tim promptly. "It was a good old-fashioned, free-for-all assault. Never have I been so shocked and surprised."

"Dear me," murmured the sergeant, looking severely upon Mr. Bentley. "At this late day and age do you still find it

necessary to go about assaulting women? You must be an out-of-luck guy indeed. It's really too bad the little lady missed her mark. Then we might have been able to hush the matter up. Instead of being buried beneath a nice, clean, protective layer of quiet earth you will now be crushed beneath the weight of public scorn and indignation."

Sergeant Devlin was now thoroughly enjoying himself. His life as a whole was a dull one. There had not been much crime of late. He had come to look on a law-breaker as a generous gift from God. This case promised to become unusually sweet and pungent. Although it pleased him to feign ignorance he was quite well aware of the identities of his three visitors. He knew the names, residences, and social standing of each actor involved in this diverting little drama. It gave him infinite satisfaction to get his hooks into some members of the upper strata for a change. Both from report and personal observation he had formed an especially low opinion of Mr. Carl Bentley. He would make that so-called gentleman suffer for the good fortune of birth and position.

"Do I understand, then, madam," he asked politely, "that you wish to lodge a charge of assault against this prisoner?"

"I surely do, Sergeant," declared Tim earnestly. "Exaggerated assault. The worst sort of assault."

Devlin scratched his head in some perplexity.

"Just what is the worst sort of assault, lady?" he asked. "Opinions might differ, you know. One man's meat is another man's poison."

"Well, this man is all poison to me," retorted Tim. "I've always been true to my husband, haven't I, dear?"

This question, coming so unexpectedly upon Sally, completely shattered the pose of calm reserve she had been striving to maintain since her first break. A flutelike voice popped out surprisingly from between her lips, the upper one of which stood sadly in need of a razor. At the sound of a woman's voice proceeding from a man's body Sergeant Devlin looked up and scanned the speaker's face with a mystified expression in which there was a shade of mistrust. This case, to

his way of thinking, bade fair to develop some rather sensational sidelights.

"Always, darling," Sally was saying in answer to Tim's question. "We all of us have our faults, but misplacing or forgetting your honor is not one of yours. That I will say for you."

"You'd have been fit to be tied to-day," Tim continued volubly. "The way that man went on was nobody's business. It was nip and tuck for a while. Didn't look as if I was going to have any honor left at all."

"May I ask how far this fiend succeeded?" inquired the sergeant. "Merely as a matter of record, you understand, my dear lady."

"Well, I wouldn't like to go into details, Sergeant," Tim modestly replied. "No lady would, but the assault proper was a complete flop. I still have all my honor left right down to the last shred, such as it is. Still, it's the only honor I have."

Tim seemed to regard his honor as he would a powder puff or lipstick or any other small article women usually carry about with them in their handbags. Sergeant Devlin would not have been a bit surprised if the little lady had produced her honor and proudly displayed it for his inspection.

"Well," he remarked after a moment of reflection, "I'm sure we're mighty glad about that."

"You're not nearly so glad as I am," said Tim. "You know, Sergeant, a girl's honor is just about the best thing she has, and sometimes it's not so good, at that. I always try to keep my honor spick and span, right up to the minute."

"Up to what minute?" Devlin inquired, with justifiable curiosity.

By this time Mr. Bentley was writhing in mental as well as bodily anguish. If this terrible woman continued to make ground at her present rate of progress he would have no more chance than the proverbially proverbial snowball in a proverbiably proverbial hell. It was high time that his voice was heard.

"It's all a lie, officer," he broke in furiously. "That woman has no honor. She's trying deliberately to frame me. Why——"

"What's that?" interrupted Tim. "Do you hear what he's saying, Sergeant? He's actually got the nerve to stand up there and tell me to my face that I haven't got any honor—no honor at all. Why, you big, hulking stiff, I'll have you know that I've got the least tarnished honor of any woman in town, which isn't saying a great deal, now that I come to think of it."

"Don't you believe her, Sergeant." Carl Bentley pleaded as a man pleads for his life. "That woman, that she-dragon masquerading behind a thin veil of virtue, actually dragged my trousers off with her two bare hands. Then, still unsatisfied by that display of female ferocity, she held me up at the point of a gun and forced me to walk through the streets in this terrible condition."

"Oh, what a whale of a lie he told," Tim exclaimed in righteous indignation. "I was merely protecting this confounded honor of mine I've been telling you about. The first thing I knew that the man was feeling that way was when he came dashing into my house and began to tear off his clothes—even his pants, Sergeant—think of it—what a sight—and then he began to make noises just like an animal. That's no way to act. After that he started lunging—that's what he did—he made lunges at me, and I can't stand being lunged at. So I very quietly said to myself, 'Sally Willows, my good woman,' I said, 'if you don't do something constructive mighty quick it's good-night for your honor.' Then I took up my husband's revolver that he won the war with in Fort Leavenworth, and I made this man stop his lunging. And that's the low-down on the whole beastly affair, so help me God."

Tim stopped for lack of breath and looked triumphantly at Carl Bentley. That gentleman's pendulous jaw was hanging low. Above the cavity thus revealed peered the stricken eyes of a beaten man. He seemed to be seeing himself as he actually might have been—lunging. Sergeant Devlin himself appeared to be deeply moved. For some moments he did not speak, but sat as if in contemplation of the vivid picture Tim had painted of Carl Bentley in action. At last he stirred and spoke.

"Mrs. Willows," he said, "you have been through a most trying ordeal, from which you luckily emerged—thanks to

your courage—with your honor quite okay." He paused and allowed his eyes to burn up Carl Bentley, then he spoke coldly to the man. "Do you wish me to believe," he asked, "that this frail woman, this lady of culture and refinement, was able, in spite of all your efforts, to drag the trousers off your large, fat, repulsive-looking legs?"

"Well," hedged Mr. Bentley, realizing too late the mistake he had made, "almost she did. She lured them off, so to speak. It was a trap—a snare. I tell you she was out to frame me and she stopped at nothing. She enticed my trousers off after she had first tried to drown me."

"This situation becomes more involved as time goes on," sighed the sergeant. "You now would have me believe that this lady also made an attempt to drown you. How can I believe a statement like that, I ask you? It's impossible on the face of it. Why, this little woman couldn't drown even a kitten, let alone a gorilla of a guy like you."

"That's because you don't know her," replied Carl Bentley, endeavoring to summon to his aid the last remnants of his depleted dignity. "If she attempts to lodge a charge of assault against me I, on my part, will prefer charges of attempted murder, defamation of character, and mental anguish against her."

"All of those," observed Sergeant Devlin, slightly elevating his thick eyebrows as he jotted down some notes on his record. "Well, this situation is altogether too delicate and at the same time too serious for a mere policeman to handle. I'll have to let you both tell your troubles to Judge Clark. He should be here in about five minutes if he doesn't get so furious at something on his way down to court that he forgets where he's going. He's like that, Judge Clark is. A man of sound and fury." At this point he paused, and, after adding a few cogent sentences to his report, passed the paper to a policeman, who vanished with it through a side door. "Joe," resumed Devlin, addressing a state trooper, "present this little party to Judge Clark with my compliments. He'll be tickled scarlet to see them. And just slip a coat over our friend here. His Honor would have a stroke if he saw him the way he is."

Mr. Bentley was hustled into an old police overcoat which made him look worse, if possible, than he was before, and then pushed through a door. Tim and Sally made ready to follow.

"Don't worry about your honor any more, Mrs. Willows," said the sergeant to Tim with a friendly smile. "But if I were in your place I would worry a little about His Honor. Judge Clark is an exceptionally irascible gentleman. Good luck to you."

"You've been so sweet to me, Sergeant," replied Tim "And for your sake I'll forget all about my honor. I've a feeling the judge and myself will get along as thick as thieves."

"There's no honor among thieves, Mrs. Willows," the sergeant reminded Tim.

"What a blessed relief that must be for lady crooks," replied Tim, pausing at the door. "I'm getting pretty well fed up with mine. It's a greatly overrated encumbrance, Sergeant, believe me. Always needs protection."

At that moment Sally dug her husband in the ribs, an act which elicited a deep-throated oath, but which nevertheless made him move on. Sergeant Devlin remained seated at his desk, thoughtfully worrying his hair. "From the way that baby talks," he said to himself, "and from the way she uses those eyes of hers I wouldn't be a bit surprised if that poor sap didn't have a little something on his side after all. Just the same he deserves to be hung on general principles. I must get a look at the judge's face when he first lays eyes on him."

Sergeant Devlin leaned back in his chair and smiled broadly.

Chapter XV. Judge Clark Almost Loses His Temper

WHEN THE LITTLE PARTY WAS REASSEMBLED IN THE COURTroom an exchange of unpleasantries immediately broke out between its contending factions.

"You're a nasty little liar," Carl Bentley flung hoarsely at Tim. "What are you trying to do, get them to hang me?"

"Yes," replied Tim promptly. "I'm hoping to get you hung

by your dirty neck. Officer, this assaulter is calling me bad names and threatening me with things."

"If you call her a nasty little liar again, I'll scratch your eyes out," cried Sally in a ringing falsetto.

"Calm yourself, Mr. Willows," urged one of the state troopers. "You're actually losing control of your voice. And as for you, you big gazebo, if——"

"Quiet!" commanded the other trooper. "Here comes His Honor now."

"What's his honor to me?" expostulated Tim. "I've got my own honor to take care of. Men haven't any honor anyway. They can lose it year in and year out and still be honorable men, but just let a woman lose her honor one teeny little bit and her goose is cooked for good. She's a gone coon, she is."

"No doubt you're right," said the trooper soothingly. "I don't know. Never went into the matter. Take it up with the judge. He's a very highstrung gentleman and he likes everything nice and orderly."

Tim subsided and turned his attention to the judge. He was a thin, little old judge and he gave the impression of having been hurriedly strung together on badly twisted wires. His sharp face was livid and shrunken, and a volcano of wrathful impatience flickered on the verge of eruption behind his small, beady eyes. As he slowly approached his desk he looked like a man who had already been tried too hard for one day. A long tuft of gray hair still clung to his otherwise bald head, the rest having been torn out during fits of judicial frenzy. Whenever the word went out that Judge Clark was enjoying one of his good moods the information was never accepted at its face value. His satellites had come to know through bitter experience that the rumor merely meant that the judge had not entered his chambers in a state of inarticulate rage.

As he now seated himself carefully behind his desk, it was only too apparent that he was not enjoying one of his softer moments. He favored the two troopers and their charges with a spiteful look from his smouldering eyes.

"What are all these people doing here?" he snapped. "They disgust me."

Briefly one of the troopers endeavored to enlighten the judge. When he had finished his sordid story, His Honor's eyes were blazing dangerously.

"Make 'em sit down," he grated. "I'll put the lot of 'em away as soon as I've cleared up these other cases."

Tim and Sally and Carl Bentley sat down, and with a feeling of increasing uneasiness watched Judge Clark's method of clearing up cases. Whatever his prisoners may have thought of it, Judge Clark's method had at least the virtue of strict simplicity and rigid impartiality. Everybody received a sentence. The first prisoner up was hardly there before he was gone again, literally whisked from the eyes of man.

"Six months," rapped out the judge. "No. Better make it seven. Next prisoner."

Business moved so briskly that finally the spectators got the impression that they were witnessing a procession of the damned rather than the administration of justice. One prisoner, a large, lachrymose Negro with hypocritically humble eyes, on being sentenced to a year less a day, endeavored to suggest to the judge that, even accepting the word in its most casual application, what had happened to him had not even remotely resembled a trial.

"Why yo' hain't even tried me, Yo' Honor," the Negro protested. "Hain't never axed me a question."

The judge looked at the Negro a long, long time—much too long for the Negro's comfort.

"Do you want me to try you?" asked the little man, in a reedy, gentle voice. "Do you want me to ask you questions?"

"Ah reckon not," mumbled the Negro. "Ah reckon ah's just as well satisfied to hurry right along now like you says."

No smile could have been grimmer than the one that twisted the judge's lips as his snappy eyes followed the back of the retreating Negro.

Although it required no little temerity to stand beneath the baleful gaze of this terrible little man perched high above her like a bird of evil omen, Sally nevertheless accompanied Tim and Bentley when they were summoned to approach the seat of justice. The judge seemed to have forgotten he had

ever seen them before. When the senior state trooper respectfully started to say his little piece the judge promptly shot up a restraining hand that was shaking with indignation as he considered the weird figure of Carl Bentley.

"Don't say one word," he commanded. "I have eyes in my head, haven't I? Am I a fool? A driveling idiot?"

"Yes," replied Tim, unable to resist the insistence in the judge's voice.

"What!" shrilled the judge. "You call me a fool and an idiot —a driveling one?"

"No," said Tim hastily. "I was saying 'yes' to something else."

"What were you saying 'yes' to?"

"I was merely saying 'Yes, you have.' "

"Yes, I have? Speak up, you ninny. Yes, I have what?"

"Yes, you have eyes in your head."

The judge's face blanched with passion.

"Of course I have eyes in my head," he snapped. "Who said I didn't?"

"Nobody," answered Tim. "You asked if you had."

"Asked if I had? What did I ask if I had?"

"If you had eyes in your head."

Tim was growing steadily more confused.

"But I know I have eyes in my head," said the judge.

"It seemed for a moment you didn't," was Tim's halting answer. "You see, you asked about them."

"Asked about who?"

"Whom," corrected Sally.

"What's that?" cried the judge.

"The word is 'whom'," replied Sally. "You asked about who and you shouldn't have. It's whom, that's what it is."

"Hold your tongue, sir. I'll ask about who I damn please."

Sally shrugged indifferently.

"You were asking about your eyes, Your Honor," Tim meekly put in.

"Damn my eyes!" howled the judge. "I'll clear up this case right now."

The little man leaned far over his desk and peered down at Carl Bentley, who shrank beneath the gaze.

"Don't say a word," he gritted. "I see it all quite clearly. One of my own policemen caught in a raid on a disorderly house—a bawdy place. What a sentence I'll give him!" So much had Judge Clark deduced from the undressed appearance and battered condition of Mr. Carl Bentley. "I didn't even know we had any such places conveniently at hand hereabouts," went on the judge in an injured voice. "What's this man doing with his buttons on? Strip 'em all off. Don't leave him a single button. These other two ran this brothel, I suppose."

"But Your Honor," protested one of the troopers, "if we strip off all his buttons the man will be mother-naked."

"Then arrest him for indecent exposure," said the judge blandly. "And why do you say 'mother-naked'? Why does everybody say 'mother-naked'? Do fathers never get naked? Do I understand that they sit about the house all day long muffled up to their ears? Expressions like that exasperate me. Don't answer. The implication is quite improper and it has nothing to do with this lecherous policeman. Hasn't he any clothes on under his coat? And what is he doing to my floor? Officer, remove that man at once! Hasn't he any better sense? Imagine!"

"Your Honor, he's dripping wet," explained the trooper.

"I can see that for myself," cried the judge. "The man's a regular human fountain—a gusher. Make him stop it."

"He can't, Your Honor," said the trooper.

"He can't?" gasped the judge. "What on earth is the matter with the man? Do you mean he can't or he won't? Where does he think he is?"

"He fell in the river, Your Honor."

"I was pushed in the river, Your Honor," Mr. Bentley corrected.

"Silence!" shouted the judge. "Or I'll push you in a cell. What's he got on under that coat?"

The other trooper pulled back the coat and Carl Bentley stood revealed. Judge Clark drew a sharp breath and blinked his eyes.

"What a sight," he managed to whisper. "My word, what a sight to behold. And to think that after all these years of honorable service on the bench I should at last be brought face to face with a thing like that. The man deserves to be put to death by torture—slowly."

The courtroom for some time past had been doing capacity business. It was obvious that word had gone out that the case of Sally Willows vs. Carl Bentley was being tried. The élite of the town was present—any number of women whose minds were not quite as nice as their frocks or their manners. And while Judge Clark was sitting back in his chair trying to devise a legal pretext for making Mr. Bentley pay the extreme penalty, one of the state troopers once more essayed to make the case a little clearer for the benefit of the bemused jurist. When finally it was borne in on that gentleman's mind that the individual he had mistaken for a policeman was merely a plain citizen he became, if anything, madder.

"Why didn't you tell me that in the first place?" he demanded, snapping up in his chair and fixing his mad eyes on Mr. Bentley. "So he first attempted to assault this woman, then he tried to murder her."

"Not quite, Your Honor," corrected the trooper. "She tried to murder him."

"What does it matter?" retorted His Honor impatiently. "Why quibble over mere details?"

"It was a case of my honor, Your Honor," said Tim, smiling up disarmingly at the little man.

"It's a lie, Judge!" cried Carl Bentley. "Look! She still has the gun in her hand."

The judge looked as requested, and his eyes grew so wide they seemed about ready to explode.

"Are my eyes playing me false?" he asked, in a voice choked with emotion. "Do I see what I see or do I don't, or whatever it is? As God is my judge I can't bring myself to hear the truth." He glared out over the courtroom as if he were trying to decide whether it would not be better to sentence everyone in sight to a life of penal servitude and then call it a day. Then he fastened his gimlet-like eyes on the two state troopers.

"You've put me on the spot," he said in a cold, thin voice. "You'll be asking me to go riding next. Don't answer. It is inconceivable to me that you have allowed this woman—the most irresponsible of all God's less agreeable creations—to confront your own judge with a revolver in her hand. It is inconceivable, I say, yet it has come to pass. Do you know what I'd like to do? I'd like to claw off your buttons with these!"

As if to make himself thoroughly understood Judge Clark thrust out two skinny hands and wriggled their fingers horribly in the pallid faces of the two state troopers.

"That's what she did to me," put in Carl Bentley, thinking the moment propitious for attempting to get on the right side of the judge. "She dragged my trousers off with her own bare hands."

"Shut up, you!" mouthed the judge.

"I wouldn't touch that person's trousers with a pair of tongs, Your Honor," Tim declared scornfully.

Judge Clark looked down at the disputant out of a pair of venom-drugged eyes.

"Tongs?" he muttered in a puzzled voice. "How did tongs get into this case?"

"They're not really in it," answered Tim. "This case is about my honor, Your Honor. I've been saying so all along."

"You haven't a spark of honor," retorted Carl Bentley bitterly. "You never had any honor. You lost it before you'd finished cutting your teeth."

This was too much for Sally. After all, it was really her honor that was being thus publicly assailed. She completely lost her temper.

"Shoot him, Tim!" she cried in a high-pitched voice. "He's insinuating things."

"Insinuating?" laughed Tim madly. "He's damn well making a clean breast of them. I'll load him so full of lead he won't even need a coffin."

As Tim leveled the automatic, Judge Clark and Mr. Bentley emitted piercing screams, but for vastly different reasons, the latter's being one of unadulterated terror while the judge's was merely the cry of an infuriated soul.

"Unarm that woman!" he shrilled passionately above the tumult of the courtroom. "Am I to be forced to sit on this bench and witness a cold-blooded murder?"

"But the thing isn't loaded, Your Honor," one of the troopers shouted.

"What!" cried the judge. "You say it isn't loaded? That settles it. That finishes everything. I'd like to crash you over the head with the butt of it. What do you think my court is, a nursery in which to practise Chicago? Will I be asked to join you in a game of ping-ping next?"

"Pong," corrected Sally.

"What's that?" asked the judge suspiciously.

"Pong," repeated Sally.

"Pong what?" inquired the judge.

"Ping-pong," said Sally briskly.

"Are you trying to play games with me?" the judge asked severely.

A peal of high, girlish laughter bursting from the be-whiskered lips of a full-grown male turned the anger of the small jurist to profound alarm. He looked at Sally as if she were some visitant from a remote planet.

"Have my ears gone back on me, too?" he muttered in a tremulous voice. "Surely no male creature can make a noise like that. It's positively uncanny. I shall have to punish this person under the law prohibiting female impersonation."

When Sally had gained control of herself the judge leaned over and spoke to her in a confidential voice.

"How did you ever manage to make a noise like that?" he asked. "It's the most extraordinary thing I've ever heard."

"It's an old family custom, Judge," Sally replied recklessly.

"Must have been a peculiar family," the judge observed thoughtfully. "Most confusing to live in. I daresay it was terrible for the neighbors."

"Nobody ever spoke to us," said Sally.

"Can't say as I blame them," commented Judge Clark. "Where I'm going to put you nobody will ever speak to you either."

"Come! Come!" boomed Tim in a deep bass voice. "Let's get on with the case."

Judge Clark spun about in his chair and looked with horror on the fair face of the speaker.

"Something's happened to *her* voice now," he exclaimed. "Are you two prisoners trying to befuddle me? Is this whole ghastly business a deep-laid conspiracy to rob me of my reason, or has that already gone? For God's sake don't tell me it was a custom in your family too."

"As a matter of fact it was," Tim replied easily. "But that's neither here nor there. It's a matter of my honor against his honor, Your Honor."

"That's one of the most baffling utterances I've ever heard," stated the judge.

"How so?" inquired Tim. "I merely said that I was counting on your honor to judge rightly between his honor and my honor, Your Honor."

"Don't go on and on," barked the judge. "What has my honor got to do with it?"

"Not a thing," replied Tim sweetly, returning to Sally's soft accents. "Why, a man of your integrity can't be seduc——"

"Stop!" shrilled the judge, seizing his last lock of hair. "Clear the court! Drive 'em out! Woman, do you realize what you're saying? Look at me. I'm a judge!"

"I wouldn't like to be a judge," said Tim in pitying tones. "But tell me, Your Honor. Can't they even be seduced?"

"Madam, are you trying to debauch me?" demanded the judge. "Do you realize that every word you utter is making the case blacker against you? I can hardly believe this object here attempted to assault you. He wouldn't have found it necessary."

"But he did, Your Honor," said Tim earnestly. "I swear to God he did. The first time he tried to assault me——"

"Am I to understand that he attempted to assault you more than once?" interposed Judge Clark.

"You are, Your Honor," replied Tim. "He was indefatigable about it. Kept it up all morning until finally I lost my patience. 'Sally Willows,' I said to myself, 'if this guy keeps on trying to

assault you, you'll never get any housework done.' You know how it is, Your Honor. A woman can't give up her entire day to warding off assaults. And I do like to keep my home looking neat and nice. You can't do that being assaulted, Judge, because as I was saying you don't know anything about assaults —not those sort of assaults, you know. It's simply impossible to try to dust and sweep with one hand and repel assaults with the other. Simply impossible. The broom gets tangled and the dust all spills and—of course you can use one foot, but that's not very ladylike and it might prove disastrous. Have you ever been caught by the foot? Well, it doesn't matter. So after doing everything in my power to make this person get it through his thick head that I was in no mood for assaults, and certainly not at such a time, what with my housework and all, I finally got my husband's gun and drove him out of the house. What else was there for me to do? I ask you that."

"Madam," thundered the judge, "I've let you run on. Experience has convinced me that is the only thing one can do with a woman. Is there one tittle of truth in all the loose things you've been saying? I ask you that."

"Tittle?" repeated Tim as if puzzled. "I don't quite understand."

At this moment Tim's face underwent a sudden alteration in its features. He jumped as if someone had pinched him. Then he stood still as if listening, and an expression of surprise and alarm spread over his face.

"What's the matter with you now?" demanded the judge.

"I don't know," answered Tim faintly. "It's very odd. Very odd indeed. I think I'd better sit down."

"But you must know what's happening to you," protested the judge. "Haven't you the slightest idea?"

Tim merely shook his head and indulged in several small jumps and budges while the judge's eyes grew strained with curiosity.

"Can't you even guess?" he asked.

"I could, Your Honor, but I'm afraid you might get mad," said Tim.

"No, I won't," Judge Clark promised eagerly. "Go on and tell. I won't get mad."

"It's really quite the most bewildering thing I've ever experienced, Your Honor," said Tim, looking the part of a thoroughly bewildered and alarmed young woman. "My appendix seems to be jumping. It's like an assault. That's why I was afraid to tell you. Thought it might make you mad. The fact is, Judge, I've been kicked often enough on the outside, but never before on the in. And that's what's happening to me now. Someone's deliberately kicking me."

"The most extraordinary story I've ever heard," observed the judge. "Can't make head or tail out of it."

"Neither can I, Your Honor," gasped Tim, giving another startled little jump. "I'm scared."

"You're making me extremely nervous," Judge Clark complained. "Can't you stop it?"

Sally had been observing her husband's strange antics with a puzzled expression. Her face now cleared and she actually indulged in a series of girlish giggles. His Honor turned reproving eyes on her.

"My dear sir, I want you to know this is no laughing matter," he snapped.

"It certainly is, Your Honor," came the amazing reply. "He's such an awful fool. Why, it's only Baby stretching. She's going to have a child."

"What?" cried the judge. "Here—now? My word!"

"When I get my hands on that baby I'll give it a piece of my mind," exclaimed Tim. "A nice time it picks out to be rollicking about on its own."

"Come! Come!" spluttered Judge Clark. "Madam, just remember this, you can't have a baby here. It's outrageous. Using my court as a maternity ward. It's an imposition, I tell you. Abandon the idea."

"It's not my idea," Tim shot back. "And who wants to have a baby in your old court, anyway? I'm not going to budge. I want to sit down. There it goes again. The fresh thing."

"You may sit down," said the judge, "but don't lie down. Don't try to have that baby. If you do I'll arrest you for some-

thing." He paused and looked distractedly about him. "I'll arrest you for contempt of court. Mr. Willows, please speak to your wife. Prevail on her to desist. Make it clear to her that a courtroom is not the proper place in which to bear a child. Do something. Do anything."

"Your Honor," said Sally respectfully, "when a baby wants to get itself born nothing's going to stop it. It goes right ahead regardless of time and place and all the laws you can pass." Sally turned to Tim, who was sitting miserably in a chair that one of the state troopers had sympathetically provided. "Think you're going to have your baby now?" she asked.

"How should I know?" demanded Tim. "I'm not a shark at this business. I'm merely an amateur—a rank outsider. But I feel as if I'm going to have something—a whole string of babies, perhaps."

"Oh, this is simply terrible," put in the judge. "Really, it is you know. I'm very much upset. Why didn't you tell me you were that way, madam?"

"Why should you be upset?" demanded Tim. "You're not having this baby. I wish you were." Judge Clark started violently and gazed with injured eyes upon the prospective mother. "Anyway," went on Tim, "I thought all along you knew. If you'd only used your eyes you could have seen I was highly pregnant."

Judge Clark looked at the small object of his anxiety as if it were not only highly pregnant but also highly explosive—a dangerous mine in the path of decency. Tim was growing a little calmer. The baby which by rights his wife should have been bearing had evidently decided to call it a day and had resumed its orderly repose.

"I'm feeling better now," declared Tim. "Sorry to have caused all this disturbance, but I daresay the little monster was getting impatient at having his mother heckled and baited and assaulted and mistreated in general. He isn't old enough to realize that suffering is a woman's lot in life."

"I'm sorry, madam," said the judge, mopping his face with his handkerchief. "I can understand many things now that previously were not quite clear. I can by no means understand

all." He considered a slip of paper for a moment, then turned accusingly on Carl Bentley. "According to this paper," rasped the judge, "you intend to prefer charges of attempted murder, defamation of character, and mental anguish against a woman who at any minute now is going to become a mother. Do you wish to withdraw those charges or would you rather hear me sentence you to twenty years of hard and humiliating labor?"

"From the way you put it," said Bentley, still suspecting Sally of some trick, "I think it would be wiser to withdraw the charges."

"Then I'll call the whole thing off," cried Tim. "And after all, Your Honor, some of you men are like that. It's merely their idea of being clubby and entertaining. Then, of course, there are lots of women who feel slighted unless a man tries to assault them at least once each time he calls. But I'm not that way. I'm magnanimous, Judge. I might have my faults like everyone else, but my worst enemy can't say that I'm not magnificent—I mean magnanimous."

"Then you're at liberty to go your separate ways," replied Judge Clark impressively. "And I hope most devoutly they never again cross mine. I'm getting altogether too old for this sort of thing. I'd prefer to spend my closing days dealing peacefully with mere murderers and cutthroats and dope fiends and people I can understand."

"May I have my husband's gun back?" Tim asked one of the troopers. "He'll be awful mad at me."

The chivalrous trooper slipped the gun into Tim's hand. He examined it a moment, then carelessly pressed the trigger. Immediately there was a tremendous explosion and Carl Bentley instinctively resumed his running. From under his desk came the impassioned voice of Judge Clark.

"What damn fool gave her that gun?" he shouted. "She'll murder the lot of us. Overpower her and take that gun away."

"It's all right, Judge," said Tim calmly. "No harm done, but I almost had twins that time."

"My God, so did I," moaned the little jurist, his lock of gray hair appearing like a flag of truce above the top of his desk.

"I just wanted to see if it was loaded," Tim explained sweetly. "I guess it was."

Incoherent noises issued from the lips of the judge. They left him greedily scrutinizing the buttons of the two state troopers. The little man appeared to be counting them.

Chapter XVI. An Inspired Advertisement

SINCE THE DISORDERLY INCIDENTS LAST RECORDED, MUCH BULK had been added to the girth which Tim wrathfully protested belonged to his wife. The social standing of the Willowses in the snooty community of Cliffside had utterly collapsed. It was now lying in a condition of supine indifference. Sinning in Cliffside was about as well established a practice as elsewhere—better than in many places. But a public and noisy demonstration against established convention such as the Willowses had staged on more than one occasion was not to be tolerated. Nice people objected strongly to having adultery, which they considered to be about the best-dressed of all the vices, dragged through the streets in rags and made the butt of indelicate observations. People who took their infidelities lightly—who tossed them off, so to speak—were not to be trusted and were little better than communists. And in Cliffside one had to be much better than a communist to attend even a dog fight. Furthermore, the Willowses, like the suspect Claire Meadows, made a practice of allowing other people to mind their own business, callously disregarding the fact that life in a community like Cliffside would be unbearable indeed unless everybody paid strict attention to everybody else's affairs. The people of Cliffside took their windows seriously. They were made not so much for the purpose of light and ventilation as to enable discreetly curtained observers to keep abreast of the current dirt. For example, it was well known that Mr. Willows, when at home, could be seen at virtually any time clad only in a strange and revealing garment, and that for no apparent reason he was given to sudden bursts of high spirits signalized

by grotesque and obscene dances which made his single garment even more revealing. He was suspected of being a little mad. Also, it had been duly noted and recorded that for many months past Mrs. Willows had taken up the practice of smoking her husband's cigars and in other disgusting ways emulating his example. So careless of appearances were the Willowses that their joint existence was much more than an open book. It was a public reading in a loud voice. Consequently Tim and Sally Willows were people to be watched, rather than cultivated. They were much better seen at a distance than heard at close range. Fewer and fewer so-called friends dropped in to visit the Willowses. It was a dangerous thing to do. Some scene of violence and unmannerly conduct usually resulted. So Tim and Sally were left very much to themselves, for which they were heartily thankful. And, even handicapped as they were by their reversed positions, they began to understand, better than they had in years, that they were irrevocably bound to each other as much by their mutual hates as by the interests they shared in common, many of which were deplorably low. No married couple in Cliffside could polish off a bottle of bathtub gin with greater conviviality and enterprise. Having literally spent some time in each other's shoes, they had gained a different perspective both of themselves and of each other, and this had been an incalculable help in the maintenance of congenial relations. The situation was still a trying one for Dopey, but then all situations were trying for that craven-spirited animal. Mr. and Mrs. Twill had philosophically reconciled themselves to a life in which the irrational was the only possible standard of normal conduct.

As for Mr. Bentley, that gentleman had rubbed himself completely off the already smudged face of the social horizon. Few young matrons, no matter how viciously disposed, were quite willing to seek romantic diversion with a gentleman who bounded along public highways in a union suit that flapped in the back. This last little detail lost Bentley many a pleasant interlude.

Claire Meadows had become an accepted influence in the lives of Tim and Sally. She instructed Tim in the rather exact-

ing laws governing the conduct of a prospective mother, and she heartlessly put a stop to his grog. And strange to relate, Sally experienced no feeling of jealousy for what had once occurred. She was much more interested in devising means and ways for the abduction of Claire's own baby from the brute of a husband who had carried his resentment beyond the bounds of human tolerance.

"It wasn't his baby anyway," Claire Meadows had naïvely explained on one occasion, "although I hardly recall the name of the little tike's father. It was just one of those things that happen when it's raining and you don't feel like reading or going out, and your own husband hates children and wants you to keep your figure."

The Willowses understood perfectly, especially Tim.

Sally and Claire were now discussing various wild projects over a couple of highball glasses, while Tim, casting them envious glances from time to time, was seated at his desk laboring over what he had come to regard as Sally's homework. He was too large now to sit comfortably at the desk, his arms seeming to have grown shorter or the desk farther removed. He found himself unable to concentrate on the business in hand. The advertisement, strangely enough, was about a union suit, the Never Flap Union Suit to be specific, and Tim Willows could not think of union suits without thinking of Carl Bentley, and he was unable to think of that gentleman without becoming somewhat mercurial. Finally he abandoned any attempt at a reasoned presentation of the ineffable charms of Never Flap Union Suits, and wrote the advertisement he had frequently been tempted to write. This finished to his entire satisfaction, he outlined the illustration to Sally and instructed her to see that the advertisement was inserted according to schedule in a popular weekly magazine.

"Let none of the powers that be clap eyes on a proof," he told her. "Fake the damned okays and keep everything under your hat. I want this to come as a complete surprise."

"It will," said Sally, when she had read the copy. "After all, it's your job. I don't mind losing it for you one little bit."

She did.

Some time later she was urgently requested to make one of a party that was even at that moment awaiting her presence in the conference room. As she passed through the general office she was impressed by the unnatural hush that lay over the place. Sally could not shake off the impression that numerous stenographers and clerks were looking at her with an expression usually reserved for the contemplation of corpses and motion pictures of devastated districts.

She opened the door and was confronted by every important member of the Nationwide Advertising Agency, Inc. And at the head of the table was Mr. Gibber himself, although he hardly looked it. The man had become the personification of retribution, beside whom an avenging angel would have looked like the very soul of lax indulgence. Sally noticed that among all the faces turned on him, those of Dolly Meades and Steve Jones alone expressed feelings of friendship and admiration. The others looked too scared to register any other emotion.

"This is going to be flower pots," Sally decided, as she closed the door behind her husband's back. "A nice wide-open break." Then she added aloud, also in her husband's voice, "You wanted to see me, Mr. Gibber?"

"Yes," replied that gentleman. "I do. And for the last time."

After such an inhospitable reception, Sally saw no reason for further disguising her own feelings.

"You almost took the words out of my mouth," she remarked, dropping to a vacant chair. "I have long thought that a world without a Gibber in it would be a far, far better place."

Disregarding this open insult, Mr. Gibber thrust out a trembling hand in which was clutched the current issue of the popular weekly containing among others the Never Flap advertisement. It occupied a full page.

"Willows," thundered the man, "I hold you and you alone directly responsible for this crime against our high calling. You, like a snake in the grass, have fouled your own nest."

"I was always under the impression that snakes were rather nice about such things," replied Sally. "However——"

She did not finish her sentence, but rose and considered the

advertisement with a critical eye. Mr. Gibber, as if hypnotized, held it out for her inspection until she had finished reading the copy and had resumed her seat.

"First time I've seen it inserted," she continued easily. "Rather good position, I think. Very arresting illustration, also. I am pleased."

Mr. Gibber shrank back as if in the presence of some loathsome object. His fingers drummed on the long table as he strove to master his indignation. Sally reached out and drew the magazine to her, then, holding it at arm's length, she studied the illustration with her head slightly tilted to one side. It was, as she said, an arresting illustration. The artist had caught the spirit of the thing splendidly.

In the foreground an aged and enfeebled gentleman was seated on a piano stool. On his meager body hung, in limp, dispirited folds, a garment remotely suggestive of a union suit. In an attempt to relieve the feeling of depression created by this obviously world-weary individual, a top hat had been tilted at a rakish angle over his dim right eye. The other one, unobstructed, looked bleakly out on life. An exceedingly decrepit and revolting-looking woman, presumably his wife or mistress, for her shrunken figure was also draped in an ill-fitting union suit, was standing near him, with one arm raised as if it were beating time to a tirade of vile and abusive language. The old gentleman appeared to be already too low in his mind to pay much attention to what she was saying. Somehow he gave the impression that this sort of thing had been going on for years and years. The progeny of this unlovely couple, three boys and two girls, had been no better endowed by nature than their parents. But this was only to be expected. The observer could not conceive of those two human wrecks begetting a normal child. These children, the oldest being no older than fourteen, were pale, emaciated, and ill-tempered, and were clad in oversized union suits. They seemed to be enjoying the worst of bad health and dispositions. The two girls were coughing lustily while the boys stood about in attitudes of pain and dejection. They seemed more capable of raising rickets than rackets like most normal boys. Yet one

also gained the impression that very little would be required to precipitate a general row. Taking it all in all, it was a singularly realistic illustration of contemporary home life. Sally admired it immensely. She felt that Tim had struck a new note in advertising.

"I am proud to assume complete responsibility for this," she remarked. "Of course, I didn't draw the illustration, but I suggested the idea. As you would say, Mr. Gibber, it's mine, all mine."

Mr. Gibber choked and snatched the offending magazine from Sally's hand.

"Mr. Gibber!" she said reprovingly. "Don't be rude."

Once more Mr. Gibber choked, then cleared his throat of the vile words he was craving to utter. Like a man convalescing after a long and debilitating illness, he smiled weakly round the table.

"Mr. Willows," he said, "I have no desire to cause you undue humiliation, but I feel that the least you deserve is to hear this advertisement read aloud in the presence of your erstwhile fellow workers."

"Go right ahead," Sally good-naturedly replied. "It will do them no end of good. That piece of copy, Gibber, together with its illustration will start a new school of advertising, most likely."

"Most likely," repeated Mr. Gibber bitterly. "A school of blithering idiots."

Under the stress of his emotions Mr. Gibber was growing almost human. He cleared his throat, elevated the magazine, took a deep breath and started to read. His voice failed and he broke down completely.

"You read it, Mr. Graham," he muttered in a husky voice. "It's too much for me. This incident has made me begin to feel my age at last."

Mr. Graham, a serious youth who eschewed all forms of healthy dissipation in favor of the "Message to Garcia" and "Acres of Diamonds" and other such literature, considered himself highly honored at having been selected to play such a prominent part on this historic occasion. Gratefully he ac-

cepted the magazine and began to read in a clear voice and with great determination. Nothing short of death was going to stop him now.

The copy that Tim had prepared for Sally was to this demoralizing effect:

"A MESSAGE TO THE MISSHAPEN

"Be of Good Cheer

"If your physical development is 'way below par take heart, because now your worst defects can be comfortably covered and no one will be the wiser."

"My God," came the whispered voice of Mr. Gibber, "what disreputable things was the man hinting at there?"

"I think I understand, Mr. Gibber," Dolly Meades replied.

"Don't explain," said Mr. Gibber hastily. "Hurry on, Mr. Graham."

Mr. Graham read:

"Men who are far from super and women who are perfect frights, attend. In the past you have been shamefully misled by underwear advertisements. You have been given to understand that in order to conceal your nakedness you must belong to clubs, know how to play games including hoop-jumping, riding innumerable horses at once, and mounting on poles to dizzy, not to say dangerous, heights. Stamp these deceptions under your feet whether they be flat or slew."

"Imagine," murmured Mr. Gibber. "Flat or slew. Could anything be more revolting? But go on, my boy, go on. Finish this sacrilege."

The boy went on:

"In the past you have been deluded into believing that you were cut off from the comforts of underwear unless you maintained at least one maid or a gentleman's gentleman.

"A vile deception!

"As a matter of actual fact you neither have to be nor to possess anything in particular save a modest piece of change to be qualified with the best to drape your unsightliness in

Never Flap
Indomitable Union Suits

"Unprepossessing under the most ideal circumstances, these union suits nevertheless make you look no sillier than those of another make.

"Once in a Never Flap outfit you can be as old and ugly, as broken in mind, body, and estate, as pot-bellied, sunken-chested, bald-headed, evil-minded or short-winded as you jolly well please, and not give a rap.

"You can be a maniac or a master mind, a physical wreck or a perfect specimen, a croucher in dark places or a strutter in the public eye, and still look equally at a disadvantage in these ridiculous yet somewhat necessary garments. They possess the one feature that all mankind in common has long craved —they

Never Flap.

"If you must look silly in something why not look silly in these?"

Long before the finish of this example of sheer lunacy young Graham's voice had taken on a hushed and frightened note. At the end it had trailed away to an appalled whisper. The majority of the faces round the table were grave with consternation. Steve Jones's and Dolly Meades's registered profound approval.

"Were you quite yourself when you wrote that?" Mr. Gibber asked at last. "Quite sober?"

"Quite," replied Sally mildly. "Never more so in my life."

"It can't be true," protested Mr. Gibber. "I am still unable to bring myself to believe that all this is not a terrible dream

and that soon I shall wake up and find everything as it was before. Why did you not let someone see a proof?"

"I wanted it to come as a surprise," said Sally innocently.

"Oh, my God!" gasped Mr. Gibber. "Imagine that! He wanted to surprise me. Did you hear what he said? Ha, ha! No, a thousand times, no. He wanted to ruin me. To demolish me. That's what he did."

The eyes that he turned on Sally were pained, heavy, and pleading. For the first time she began to feel a little bit sorry for the man. Mr. Gibber was really suffering.

"Why did you do it?" he asked, almost humbly. "Why did you do this thing? We have been good to you here—given you latitude—excused things. Before you go for good tell me what prompted you to do this mad act?"

"Mr. Gibber," replied Sally, quite seriously, "that advertisement is the inevitable reaction of an experienced copy writer against the school of romance, idealism, and optimism that has emasculated the profession for many years. It is the expression of a fundamental craving for the realities of life. Until recently I could not refer even to such a common article as a fork without calling it the glittering servant of cultured lips or some other such balderdash. It was getting unbearable for my friends." Sally paused and took a deep breath. "Then this reaction set in," she continued. "I made no effort to encourage it. The thing was stronger than I was. That's why I still feel the advertisement we have just been privileged to hear is an inspired piece of work. You see, I suddenly realized that things were things, that a chair, for instance, was in reality a chair and not the comfortable companion of one's leisure hours; that a piano was actually a piano and not the inspired creation of singing souls; that a union suit, whether it flaps or remains discreetly closed, is, after everything has been said and done, merely a union suit instead of the ideal garment for men and women who appreciate the artistry of master weavers." Once more Sally paused and looked hopefully at Mr. Gibber. "Then, sir," she continued, "I had a vision. Suddenly I seemed to be seeing the whole world stripped to its union suit. Mr. Gibber, I saw literally millions of mortals clad only in union suits, some

of which flapped coyly while others didn't. But that doesn't matter, although I will say that those whose union suits didn't flap looked much nicer—not quite so helpless and unprotected, if you get what I mean. The lame, the halt, and the blind, the physical wreck and the perfect example of manhood and womanhood passed before my eyes. There were kings in that great procession as well as crooks. There were bishops as well as bouncers, athletes as well as scholars. And, my dear, good sir, every mother soul of them was clad simply in a union suit. It was a horrifying vision of democracy, of stupendous and compelling magnitude. Spellbound, I gazed. And what was my delight and surprise, my dear sir, when who should come puffing and panting up well along toward the rear but you yourself, Mr. Gibber. You were an amazing sight, Mr. Gibber—immense! A figure to give one pause. And I am glad to say your union suit did not flap. Let me describe——"

"Enough!" screamed Mr. Gibber. "Enough! Take this madman from my sight and give him two weeks' extra pay. Give him anything he wants so long as he goes away and never comes back again."

Steve Jones and Dolly Meades escaped from the conference room on the pretext of following Mr. Gibber's instructions. Some minutes later Sally kissed the reception clerk for the last time and departed homeward. Tim, now very far gone, sat, as he had once prophesied, like a jovial Madam Falstaff and listened enthralled to his wife's story.

"That's the first job I ever lost," he observed at last, "and I'm glad of it."

"It's the first one I ever had," replied Sally, "and I hope to God it's the last. It was like dwelling in a world of make-believe—a regular fairy-tale world."

"We've pretty well shattered it, anyway," said Tim. "And you know, Sally, I wouldn't be at all surprised if that advertisement pulled big in spite of Mr. Gibber."

Tim was right again. It did.

Chapter XVII. Two Letters and a Crisis

IT IS DIFFICULT TO SAY WHETHER OR NOT HIS PAST ASSOCIATION with Mr. Ram influenced Richard Willows, Tim's uncle, to intervene at this critical moment in the affairs of his terrifically metamorphosed young nephew. The fact remains that this staunch defender of the unfaithful and protector of women's more intimate rights did intervene most effectively and in so doing radically altered the course of the Willowses' misdirected days. Dopey was also affected by this sudden change no less than were the Twills themselves, the craven beast's last hope in the immutable order of things.

The sad truth is that since Sally had been discharged from Tim's job these two irresponsible young persons had found themselves in water of an alarmingly rising temperature. They were very much with child—at least Tim was—but depressingly without work.

"We have an overabundance of the one and not nearly enough of the other," remarked Tim, ruefully surveying his vast proportions in the mirror. "Something tells me on good authority that it won't be long now."

"Too much baby has made Daddy a big girl," replied Sally, looking up from her sewing. She was making baby things and finding it rough sledding with Tim's fingers. "A conservative estimate would place it somewhere in the neighborhood of a quartet."

"Why not make it a glee club and be done with it?" was Tim's morose response to this.

What money remained to them in the bank did not overtax their mutual inability to add, or rather, in this case, to subtract. The answer to their problem was rapidly approaching zero. For once they found arithmetic too simple for their comfort.

"If I wasn't so confounded large," observed Tim, "I'd try

the badger game, but no man would let himself be lured by this figure."

"You might tell your victim you were concealing a jug of wine," suggested Sally, seriously considering the possibilities of working the badger game on the local banker.

While this unholy session was in progress Mr. Ram from his perch on the bookcase sorrowfully regarded Tim and Sally and racked his brain for some solution of their problem. He did not approve of the badger game. Never had. He had always considered it a particularly dirty trick. It had been played on several prominent members of his family in centuries past and had set all Egypt chuckling. Why was it, he wondered, that these two young persons always thought of low devices? There was no pleasure to be had in losing one's moral values if the values themselves were negligible. What Mr. Ram liked was the gradual dissolution of a person's moral structure over a period of years. It should be done artistically so that a few untried vices were left to comfort one's declining years.

The little idol was in a quandary. The situation for which he was responsible had become more complicated than he had anticipated. It had contrived to get itself out of even his fine Egyptian hand. When he had first become aware of Tim's pregnancy he had been highly amused, but as the months passed and Tim gave no indication that he was ever going to stop getting larger Mr. Ram's feelings underwent a gradual change. He began to regard his victim's bulk with a shocked and sympathetic eye. After all, was not he, Mr. Ram, a man at heart? Did he not entertain himself all of man's narrow prejudices against bearing children? Mr. Ram was sincerely sorry for what he had done. Not only had he established a dangerous precedent, but also let Tim in for what at best was a most disconcerting ordeal. However, too many inches had already been added to Tim's girth for Mr. Ram to take any definite action. Therefore, Mr. Ram was no less delighted than were Tim and Sally when the letter that follows was received from the former's uncle and the little idol's best friend. Sally brought the letter up from the dining room and gave it to

Tim. He read it aloud to her to prevent her from leaning too heavily on his shoulder, or rather, on her own shoulder.

"My dear boy [*the letter began*]:

"According to my last information from you some member of your household was going to have a baby. Whether it was you or Sally or your dog or one of the Twills I was unable to decide. If it is you, all I will say is that I am not a bit surprised. America has been responsible for some remarkable innovations. I have long suspected that this would happen. Once begin to share your rights with a woman and you'll very speedily find yourself left without any rights to share."

"True talk, that," remarked Tim, looking up from the letter. "My uncle is a man of great merit and wisdom."

"True talk, me eye," said Sally, inelegantly. "That uncle of yours is a libidinous old associate of scarlet women."

Tim looked pained and resumed reading.

"As your inordinately nosey wife has probably already noted the postmark [continued the letter] I have at last brought my aged bones and depleted seraglio to rest on the meretricious shores of the Mediterranean, the happy expiring ground of expatriated physical wrecks and moral lepers, to both of which classes I now definitely belong.

"It has taken me years of the most exacting debauchery to achieve my present rank of distinction. Yet even while I am being almost literally carried along on my daily walks by two of my most indomitable mistresses, I feel that the sacrifices I have made for women have not been made in vain.

"The trouble is that these two Jezebels detest each other so thoroughly that at times I become a little nervous lest they drop me in order to indulge in violence. Once I attempted a wheel chair. Never again. The two ladies fought so actively for the privilege of pushing me over a cliff that the chair itself was spun like a top and all of the cocktails

I had ever taken seemed to wake up and confront my already weakened system.

"It is not nice. I am still filled with awe and wonder whenever I think of Solomon and all the mistresses he had and the honorable years he attained. Compared with his, my life has been a failure. I have merely skimmed the surface. However, I have done my best, than which I am told angels can do no more, although there is no evidence that they ever tried. But then, I know little about angels save that they seem to have spent most of their time singing, attending, and avenging, one of their number having originated the business of professional bouncing.

"But I run on and already I hear the sounds of female voices raised in high discord in the next room. Among these unpleasant voices by all odds the highest and most furious is that of a Russian countess who unfortunately escaped the firing squad of the usually painstaking Bolsheviks, the only fault I have to find with the Soviet regime. Why should it expect me to shoot its confounded countesses?

"I have another mistress whom I suspect not only of having poisoned an English army officer in India, but also of entertaining the most fantastic hopes of being able to play the same low trick on me.

"Both of these ladies fight so violently with each other all day long that at night they are so spent with fury I am forced to put the poor old things to bed. This is no way. They are mistresses in name only.

"There is another lady attached to my establishment who has recently become paralyzed in every limb. So you see, my boy, I am really defeating my own ends. What was once an active and flourishing harem has become an old ladies' home. I often think of chucking the lot of them out and treating myself to a new deal, but somehow I never get round to it. Some of these women have been with me for years. We've become used to each other and we understand our various little likes and dislikes, only with the women it seems to be mostly dislikes. Anyway, I figure it out that it's better to be

poisoned by an old and tried mistress than ruined by a new one.

"As a matter of fact I have a feeling that everything would be quite comfortable if they would only give up their eternal battling and quit stealing my grog. There is no logical excuse whatsoever for this last failing. With an abundance of wine and spirits on all sides of them they nevertheless have the puerile idea that mine might be just a little bit better or stronger or something. Perhaps they do it for the malicious joy they take in irritating me, or because they hope to get each other into trouble. I don't know.

"We see a good many tourists here—trippers, I believe they are called by superior persons who have been for a week on the Continent. You may be surprised to learn that I am not at all unfavorably impressed by the American contingent. True enough, they manage to get themselves remarkably drunk, but I see no reason to blame them for putting into practice what Europeans defend in theory. Then again, they buy an alarming quantity of useless things quite cheerfully, although no one realizes more keenly than they that they are being thrice cheated as well as despised by the sycophantic, franc-frenzied vendors, who fawn in their faces and sneer behind their backs. And I find American women entirely charming. They have lovely feet and legs as a rule and a refreshing capacity for enjoyment. Which reminds me I should be doing a little something about attaching an American example to my international collection of female ruins. Perhaps you might bring one over with you when you come. There I go forgetting again. I overlooked telling you that as soon as whoever's going to have that baby has it, I want you to transfer your entire household to this address. Don't forget Mr. Ram. There are some matters I would like to take up with him.

"One of the reasons for this summons is that I'm seriously considering getting out a book—*Miserable Mistresses,* or some such title—and I am depending on you to do the writing. It will be an education in itself. In return for this service I will support both you and yours in relative luxury, and

when I die I shall leave you not only lots of money but also all of my mistresses who have not already preceded me to the grave.

"How is that for a generous uncle? On second thought you can burn the residuary mistresses with my body. This, I think, would by far be the wiser thing to do. They are very noisy.

"I am, my dear boy, your expectant uncle, or to make it clearer, your mother's husband's brother,

"RICHARD WILLOWS."

And in this letter there was wealth—wealth enough to maintain the Willows establishment, including its bootlegger, for a couple of years. This wealth was in the form of a draft, one of the handsomest bits of paper Tim had ever been privileged to behold. Uncle Dick, true to his prodigal nature, had been more than lavish. Tim passed the draft to Sally.

"That," he observed, "is sufficient to take the whole lot of us round the world."

"Without the necessity of drawing a sober breath," replied Sally. "Wish you'd hurry up and do that baby into English."

"Well," said Tim, "this gives me something to work on. It almost reconciles me to my unfortunate position. What's that other letter?"

"Oh, this," answered Sally. "It's nothing. Some old letter from our one-time job."

Tim opened the envelope, looked dumbly at another scrap of paper, unfolded the letter and read:

"MY DEAR WILLOWS:

"I am enclosing your regular salary check for the past few weeks just as if nothing had ever happened to interrupt our mutually pleasant and profitable relations.

"You had hardly left the office before I realized the true significance of your advertisement. However, I kept this knowledge to myself and awaited results.

"True enough, my perspicacity once more justified my patience. Our advertisement, Willows, has proved a huge

success. You may think this remarkable, but then, of course, your experience is not nearly so vast as mine. I can say with truth that I suspected what would happen all the time. However, as I have already said, I kept this knowledge to myself.

"I am now prepared to share the honors of success with you. Of course, you were hardly aware of the true value of this advertisement, but you were in a sense responsible for its creation. I wish to be entirely fair. Therefore, I suggest that you report to this office at the earliest possible moment. We shall have a conference then with a view to creating an entire campaign along the same lines. I shall be glad to incorporate your ideas with mine should they prove of any value.

"I am sure we should both of us feel highly gratified at the results of our mutual efforts.

"Sincerely yours,

"HORACE GIBBER, *President.*

"P.S. For some reason the staff has gotten the idea that you have asked to be reinstated. To avoid confusion I have made no effort to alter this impression, which in a sense is nearly the correct one. However, it makes no difference.

"H. G.

"Well, for heaven's sweet sake," said Tim. "That tears it. I'm going to have a baby. I'm so damn mad I can't think of anything else to do. The old son of a mother who never rejected an improper suggestion. I'm going to have that baby. I'm going to have it almost immediately."

He rushed to a table and, seizing a pen, wrote on a piece of paper, "To hell with you, Gibber." After this he signed his name and thrust the sheet into an envelope, which he addressed to Horace Gibber at the Nationwide Advertising Agency, Inc.

"Post this as soon as you can," he told Sally, "but not before you have cashed his check. Remember that. Get the money first, then send the letter. Now for that baby. Hurry, Sally. For God's sake, do something. I am brought to bed with child. I am accouching. Take me somewhere. Quick."

"Where do you want to go?" asked Sally, becoming excited herself.

"Where?" repeated Tim indignantly. "In the middle of Times Square, of course, or some other equally appropriate spot. Take me anywhere you feel like. I've got to lie-in."

"Now don't get all flustered," pleaded Sally. "Be calm about this matter. Where would you like to lie-in? We have the money now."

"In the Bide-a-Wee Home, of course," chattered Tim bitterly. "With the rest of the dogs. Be a little more helpful. I daresay you won't actually believe I'm going to have this baby until I hand it to you all tied up in a nice, neat package."

"You run on so," complained Sally. "What makes you think you are going to have this baby, anyway?"

"There are certain things, Sally," said Tim, with great dignity, "that are revealed only to a prospective father. That baby is on the way. Don't ask me why."

Suddenly Sally had a bright idea. She hurried to the telephone and buzzed the operator.

"Where's a good place to go when you want to have a baby?" asked Sally when she had succeeded in attracting that young lady's straying ear.

Tim emitted a groan of disgust.

"I don't want to have a baby," said the operator. "But if I was in your place I'd go into hiding. Shall I give you Information?"

Sally hung up and looked fearfully at Tim.

"The operator doesn't seem to know," she said.

"Then call up a preacher or a druggist," suggested Tim. "Maybe the police station could give us a hint."

"We've had enough to do with the police," said Sally resolutely. "They'd probably lock the both of us up for disorderly conduct. Be calm, Tim. I'm thinking."

"And in the meantime I'm childbearing," her husband shouted. "Do you want me to whelp my young single-handed like a wolf of the fields?"

"God helps those who whelp themselves," Sally observed briskly as she once more hurried to the telephone.

"Think you're funny, don't you?" cried Tim. "I swear to God if you don't do something I'll have this child right here on your hands."

This time Sally called up the nearest hospital and made all the necessary arrangements.

"Why didn't you do that in the first place?" Tim demanded.

"Didn't occur to me," she answered, "but I'll remember it the next time."

"The next time?" cried Tim, grabbing up a handful of cigars and making for the door. "Don't be foolish. The next time I have a baby you can . . ."

The end of this declaration was muffled by the clatter he made on the stairs, but Sally did not need to be told. Motherhood had done little to elevate Tim's choice of expressions.

Chapter XVIII. False Alarm

BY THE TIME SALLY HAD DRIVEN HER CHATTERING HUSBAND to the hospital she herself was a nervous wreck, while he had abandoned words in favor of weird noises. Forgetting utterly the rôle of prospective father she should have been playing on this occasion, she left Tim in the car and rushed through the entrance and addressed the reception clerk. That gentleman was busily engaged in sorting a seemingly endless stack of cards, from which he refused to lift his eyes when Sally spoke to him in the high, flurried tones of a hard-pressed woman.

"My husband wants to have a baby," she told the clerk.

"If he succeeds I'll give him an apple," the clerk answered, selecting a fresh card and scrutinizing it closely. "It's quite out of the usual. In fact it seems silly. Your husband should be on the receiving end of the line. Now, if it were you, madam, I might be able to do a little something."

"No," protested Sally. "It's urgent. You don't understand."

"It's you who don't understand," put in the clerk. "If your husband is old enough to be married he should certainly know

by this time that he can't have a baby. Perhaps you'd like his mind looked into. We have several fine alienists here, but, unfortunately, no paternity ward."

"But he's going to have a baby," said Sally helplessly. "I know it."

"Go back, lady," replied the clerk in a bored voice, "and tell him not to be so stupid. He can't steal your stuff and he should have better sense than to try it. He'll just be wasting a lot of time and it will all come to nothing."

"But he's having it out there in the automobile," protested Sally.

"Come, come," murmured the clerk. "This is going too far. I'd go away if I were in your place, or somebody'll come along and stick you in the psychopathic ward."

In the face of this possibility Sally remained silent. And all the time Tim was probably having his baby alone in the automobile. She was afraid to go back. Presently the clerk looked up and started slightly.

"Where did that woman get to?" he demanded. "Are you the gentleman who wanted to have a baby?"

"Are you mad, sir?" replied Sally in Tim's voice.

"I'm afraid so," answered the clerk. "What do you want?"

"My wife wants to have a baby," said Sally.

"Well, thank God for that, at any rate," remarked the clerk. "Had a woman in here just now whose husband was insisting on having a baby. Wouldn't take no for an answer. Fancy that. Poor sap doesn't know when he's well off. If men had to have babies there wouldn't be any sex life left."

"Perhaps Mr. Volstead would introduce an amendment for birth prohibition," Sally suggested.

"It would be a damn sight more popular than his other one," remarked the clerk. "But what about this wife of yours? How does she want to have this baby?"

"I didn't know there was a choice," said Sally, a little timidly.

"No, no," replied the clerk impatiently. "You don't seem to understand. I mean, does she want to have it in the ward, in a semi-private room, or do you want a special room for her?"

"Oh, I've already made all arrangements," said Sally. "Just telephoned them in. My name's Willows. Wife's Mrs. Sally Willows. Private room and all."

At this moment Tim came struggling up the stairs.

"Say, Buddy," he called out. "Where's a good place to have a baby around here?" Then he spied Sally. "Oh, there you are," he continued irritably. "I could have had the whole Grand Army of the Republic out there in that damned car for all you cared."

"Is this your wife?" asked the clerk.

"It is," replied Sally, without any show of pride.

"Then ask her to stop smoking that cigar in the hallway, will you. It's against the rules."

Tim disgustedly tossed the cigar stub away and substituted a new one for it.

"Any objections to my chewing on the end of this thing?" he demanded.

The clerk looked slightly dazed. This Willows outfit struck him as being somewhat hardboiled.

"No," he replied politely. "If your husband can stand for it I guess I can."

"He'll damn well have to stand for it," rasped Tim. "Think of what I have to stand for. Bet you wouldn't go through with it. All you have to do is to sit pretty and make a lot of poor women have a lot of poor babies. You're virtually a murderer, you are."

"Calm yourself, madam," said the clerk hastily. "I assure you I'm not responsible for all those babies."

"There you go," snapped Tim. "What did I tell you? You wash your hands of the whole business. You just sit pretty and——"

A woman, howling for "mommer," was dragged by at this moment between two sweating relatives. Tim forgot what he was saying and began to mop his forehead.

"My God!" he gasped. "This is worse than capital punishment. The Last Mile isn't in it with this charnel house."

The reception clerk summoned a nurse and Tim, with Sally in attendance, was led to an elevator and thence to his private

room. Sally was told to wait about in the hall until called for. She withdrew somewhat timidly and stood outside Tim's door, studying her strange surroundings. She felt very excited and at the same time low in her mind. Something fundamental in her nature kept telling her that by rights she should be having this baby. In a sort of dim way she seemed to realize that she was better equipped to go through with this thing than was Tim. In addition to this she felt that she really would like to bear Tim a child if only to be able to tell him he didn't know what pain and suffering really meant. She would have gotten a lot of presents and petting if she'd had this baby. And Sally wanted presents and petting. She didn't like being a father. She wanted to be a woman—herself—as nature had intended her to be. Talk about the "Well of Loneliness," she herself was in a bottomless pit. And she felt terribly afraid for Tim. She was actually suffering for him. If she could only change places now with the stupid old thing. It was terrible for him to have a baby. He was much too nervous and fastidious. Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Tim's deep voice raised in bitter protest.

"For God's sake," she heard him saying, "you're not going to do a thing like that to me, are you?"

"But I have to," replied the nurse impatiently. "Don't be so stupid, Mrs. Willows."

"Perhaps I am," said Tim, "but if I had even so much as suspected you were going to subject me to this crowning humiliation you'd never have dragged me within a mile of this hospital. Who thought up this little indignity?"

"It has to be done, Mrs. Willows."

"Well, go ahead and do it, but please watch your step. This isn't a bit funny. What are you laughing at?"

"You're the silliest patient I've ever had," came the nurse's voice. "You don't seem to know a thing about this business."

"I know much more than I ever thought I would," replied Tim. "I could write a whole book about it and if I did I would strongly advise all women to leave their husbands at the altar, to have nothing whatever to do with them."

"Don't make me laugh, Mrs. Willows, and do hold still. I'd hate to hurt you."

"I believe I'd die if you did. Do you think I'm going to die? I wouldn't like to die, but I think I am. I think I'm going to die like a dog—like a dirty dog."

"You won't die, Mrs. Willows. They seldom do."

The woman who had entered the hospital calling lustily for "mommer" now began to summon the entire family at the top of her voice. It was a hair-raising sound. Even Sally shivered.

"That poor woman is most certainly dying like a dog," she heard Tim saying. "Don't tell me she can possibly live after making such sounds as those."

"Oh, she's all right," said the nurse reassuringly. "That woman will have her baby like an old veteran. We have her here almost every spring. Yelling like that is a trădition in her family. It's a good sign."

"Do you think I ought to yell a bit?" asked Tim.

"Not unless you feel like it," replied the nurse.

"I want to do what's right, you know," went on Tim. "You see, I shouldn't be having this baby at all."

"No?" said the nurse politely.

"Oh, no," replied Tim. "It's not in my line. I'm really a man."

"What!"

"Yes indeed, nurse. I really am a man all except my body and that belongs to my wife. It's all very confusing."

"You'll feel lots better in a little while, Mrs. Willows. Such ideas will pass away. There. I'm all finished. I'll have you ready in a couple of shakes."

Doctors, internes, and nurses. Nurses of various types and classes. Scared faces waiting on the dictates of inexorable nature. Adventure, expectancy, and stark primitive anguish. Triumph and safety. Shattered hopes and muffled hearts. Life and Death impatiently brushed elbows along the corridor of that ward. And men, like poor dumb beasts, waited guiltily wherever they were put, and vowed to themselves that if their wives only came safely through, they'd be much better hus-

bands and try to understand the talkies. Then a quick change. With mother and child doing well, off go those poor dumb beasts to receive grog and congratulations. Many a fearful hangover has been the result of a successful birth. Sally began to feel that every nurse that passed her was looking at her with scornfully accusing eyes. It wasn't fair. Women wanted to have babies just as much as men. As a matter of fact no end of women looked upon a baby as the ball to the chain —an anchor to keep the irresponsible old hulk from drifting into forbidden ports. And who could blame them? mused Sally. Men and women were merely animals that put their fur coats in storage or pawn instead of shedding them all over laps and landscapes.

Tim was being wheeled out on a table. A half-smoked cigar was clenched between his teeth. When he saw Sally he held out a hand and took hers.

"Just like an hors-d'œuvres wagon," he observed. "Only I'm more like a high tea. This is Baby's first ride."

"Pretty soft," said Sally, stooping down to kiss him.

"Yes?" drawled Tim, looking at his wife vindictively. "I'm glad you think so. You and Mr. Ram have gotten me in a nice fix. A pretty pair, the both of you. Like hell. And don't be too set up. How do you know you're the father of this child? Did you ever see our ice man? He has the loveliest mustache. Like the horns of a dilemma. One end points to heaven, the other goes to hell. I chose the low road and I hope you're satisfied. Tell my chauffeur to shove off for the delivery department or I'll begin to bawl for mommer."

Sally kissed the loquacious man again, but said nothing. As if fascinated she followed the table down the long hall. Tim kept telling anyone who would listen that these damn doctors and nurses were putting him on the spot as well as taking him for a ride. "Don't ever get with child," he warned a venerable gentleman with a flowing beard. "They'd cut Niagara Falls off as quick as a wink." The old gentleman shuddered and repeated a few lines from the Talmud.

At the doors of the operating room Tim rose on one elbow and looked spitefully back at Sally.

"Don't think I'm reconciled to this, my fine lady," he sang out. "Don't think I bear child willingly. No, I tell you. A thousand times, no. Never will I be satisfied until I see you on one of these damn things. Shove off, nurse. California, here I come."

The doors closed on the still vociferating Tim, and Sally, feeling a trifle embarrassed, stood as close to them as possible.

"Hello, boys," she heard him saying to the doctors. "Stand and deliver! Snap to it."

There were a murmur of voices and the sound of swiftly moving feet, then Tim was speaking again.

"Look out there!" she heard him exclaim. "Quit mawling and hauling me about or I'll call this whole business off. What on earth are you doing with my feet? Leave those feet alone. You don't bear child with your feet. And I don't want to go bicycle riding, anyway. I suppose you'll be putting me on an electric horse next. Ouch! What you doing now? Well, of all the damn things. Have a heart, Doc.

"Would you be satisfied with two very small babies or would you rather have one fairly large one?" Tim demanded.

"Madam," replied the doctor, exasperated beyond measure, "I don't care if you have a yak so long as you have something."

"What!" Sally heard Tim shout. "A yak? What a queer mind you have, Doctor. Fancy having a yak. Is there any possibility of that? By God, there is. That devil, Ram, is capable of anything. Get me out of here, nurse. Quick. I don't feel at all like having a yak to-day."

"Calm down, Mrs. Willows," came the doctor's voice. "I was merely fooling."

"Sure," replied Tim. "I know you guys. You've got a swell sense of humor. You keep on asking me to do something down all the time. First it's bear down and then it's calm down. Next thing I know you'll be asking me to jump down. I'm not going to have that yak, that's all there is to it. Another day, perhaps. Might as well take me back now. Just what is a yak? I don't feel in the mood, anyway. I've changed

my mind. That's a woman's privilege. Shove off, nurse. Are there any books in this dump?"

"Well, Mrs. Willows," said the doctor, "I can't very well make you have a baby."

"I'm afraid not, Doc," replied Tim.

"Madam," came the voice of the doctor, "you're the hardest case that has ever come into my hands. Nurse, you should never have brought her in here in the first place. She isn't ready yet. Take her out and don't bring her back until you can get some sense into her head."

"Come on, nurse," said Tim. "Let's get ourselves out of his hands. I don't like the looks of this place. This obstetrician might get obstreperous. Try that when you're stewed, Doc."

Tim was wheeled back to his room and it was a matter of three days before he had his child. Those three days will never be forgotten by the staff of the maternity ward. Tim almost succeeded in disrupting the entire hospital. When Sally called on the morning of the third day she was met by the head nurse. Tim was not in his room.

"Where's the patient?" Sally demanded.

"Search me," the head nurse replied with a helpless toss of her hands. "We can't keep track of her, Mr. Willows. She might be anywhere in the hospital, for all we know. Last time I saw her she was playing pinochle with a couple of internes and smoking a big black cigar. She's a strange woman, your wife, Mr. Willows. We can't make her out. Seems to have absolutely no feminine instincts. Can't understand how she ever came to be having a baby. You'll have to say something to her. Indeed you will, sir. She's upsetting our hospital. We have to keep an eye on her all the time to see that she doesn't go lugging somebody else's baby off to her own room. Says she's practising up. Yesterday she had three of them at once. For a moment it looked as if she were trying to juggle them. And last night she stole some whiskey from one of the laboratories and kept singing about someone who had made her what she was and who she hoped was satisfied. It's too bad, Mr. Willows, the way she goes on. Really it is."

Sally left the head nurse still talking and went in search of

Tim. She found him at last, seated in a pantry-like arrangement, arguing passionately with two internes. In his hand were clutched some bills.

"What?" he snapped, glancing up from the table. "You back again?"

At the sight of Sally both of the internes rose.

"Mr. Willows," one of them began excitedly, "your wife is deliberately cheating us. She's gotten all our money and now she wants to play for our pants. When we tell her she's cheating she flies into a rage and tells us we're retarding her pregnancy. It's not fair. Look at all the money she has."

"It is fair," cried Tim. "You're not having a baby. I got to get something out of it, don't I?"

"We didn't ask you to have a baby, did we?" the interne shot back.

"Ask me to have a baby?" Tim laughed scornfully. "You'd have to chase me over seven counties to have a baby."

"And she keeps on changing her voice so rapidly that we don't know how many players are sitting in on the game," the other interne complained. "She gets us all rattled, Mr. Willows. Make her play fair."

Sally smiled in spite of herself and promised to make Tim behave. The upshot of it was that Tim grudgingly gave back to the internes a small percentage of his winnings and Sally got permission to take him out for a little walk.

"Take her for a long walk," urged the doctor. "In fact, Mr. Willows, we don't care how far you take her. If she wasn't your wife I'd suggest taking her down to the river and pushing her in. The other night she came barging into the operating room when a woman was having twins, and asked me if I had a nail file. Can you imagine that? And when I told her I hadn't she said I was a hell of a doctor. Last night she got one of our finest surgeons up at four o'clock in the morning just to find out whether she had a corn or an ingrowing toenail. A woman about to be a mother not knowing a simple thing like that . . ."

Sally also left this person still talking and took the cause of dissension for a walk. The cause insisted on being taken to a

movie and then complained loudly and bitterly because there was not sufficient room between the rows of seats.

"Don't they expect maternity cases ever to go to the movies?" Tim demanded. "There ought to be a law."

The picture was one of those charming underworld idyls in which everyone stood on the wrong spot and went riding in the wrong car. It was tastefully decorated with machine guns and dead bodies. In the midst of a particularly optimistic fusillade Tim emitted a gasp.

"That does it," he said. "Here comes baby. Oh, dear, what shall I do? Get me out of here quick. Will you pardon me, mister? I'm going to have a baby. No. No. You'll have to do better than that. Get clean out into the aisle or I'll be having this baby in your lap. Hurry up, you lug."

It was like a bad dream for Sally. All Tim would do was to take frightened little hops and declare to the audience that he was going to have a baby. Somehow she managed to get him out of the place and into the automobile.

"A typical American birth," groaned Tim. "Bearing a baby to the music of machine guns. I suppose it will sleep on a sandbag and cut its teeth on a gat."

"Yes," agreed Sally, "and no doubt its favorite candy will be a nice box of bomb-bombs."

"Put your foot on it," pleaded Tim.

Ten minutes later they were back in the hospital and twenty minutes after that, to the relief of the entire organization, Tim was delivered of his child and became by virtue of the achievement the first male mother on record.

Chapter XIX. The Mystery of the Maternity Ward

THE NURSE DECIDED IT WAS HIGH TIME FOR THE PSEUDO-Mrs. Willows to favor her baby with its first nursing. The baby, from the noises it was making, was evidently of the same opinion. Together they entered Tim's room. It was still quite early in the morning. Tim was sound asleep.

With the baby in her arms the nurse approached the bed and looked down. Then every vestige of color and intelligence left her face. Even the baby stopped his bawling and looked a little shocked as well as disappointed. The nurse drew a scandalized breath and passed a hand across her forehead.

"Am I mad?" she asked herself. "Have I qualified as a full-fledged nurse after years of grim, grubby effort only to be deprived of my reason? I had better sit down on something quite safe and solid and pull myself compactly together."

She quietly left the bed, carefully sat down in a comfortable chair, and went into a huddle with the baby. This thing had to be thought out, and perhaps in this crisis two heads would be better than one. With fingers that trembled slightly she undid the infant's swaddling clothes and examined every inch of its body. Feeling somewhat reassured she proceeded to redress the baby. She had made no mistake regarding the child's sex. She was still capable of differentiating between the two. This was something. This was a lot. The nurse felt encouraged, but in no sense optimistic. She was still quite mad so far as the parentage of this child was concerned.

What the nurse had seen when she had looked down on that bed had been more than enough to make an entire hospital staff doubt its sanity. To state it baldly, what the nurse had seen was a man, a gross, self-satisfied man badly in need of a shave, sleeping luxuriously in a bed in which a wife and mother should have been. In fact, where a wife and mother must still be or else the entire universe was terribly, terribly wrong, and there was hope in neither science nor religion, and this baby was probably not a baby at all but a snake in the grass or the man in the moon or a couple of other guys. The nurse began to giggle nervously, bouncing the baby the while with increasing vigor. Why shouldn't she sing and dance and make a morning of it? Perhaps it would be amusing to find the head nurse and tear off all her clothes. It might be still funnier, though, to set fire to all the beds and squirt the extinguisher in the house doctor's eyes. The nurse was not sure. She was convinced, though, that she was getting worse, getting madder and madder by the minute. With a violent mental effort she

pulled herself together and tried to fix her mind on the problem. To her eternal undoing the problem was sitting up in bed. Tim, wild-eyed and incredulous, was frantically examining his person.

"My God!" he cried, with a delighted smile. "I'm a man again. Fancy that, nurse."

"I don't care what you are," the nurse replied aggressively, "this baby's got to be nursed."

"I hope you don't think I'm going to nurse it?"

"You certainly are," replied the nurse. "You bore this child and now you're going to nurse it."

"What with?" asked Tim triumphantly.

The nurse paid no attention. She had lost her belief in everything. She clung tenaciously to one fact: this object in that bed, whether it was fish, flesh, or fowl, had given birth to a baby, and she, the nurse, was going to see that it suckled its baby or died in the attempt. Resolutely she approached the bed and thrust out the baby at Tim.

"Suckle this young," she said fiercely, "and make it snappy."

"What do you mean, suckle this young?" demanded Tim. "Have some sense, nurse."

"No," said the nurse, "I won't. I once had a little sense and this is what happened. It's much nicer being mad."

"Couldn't you get one of these mothers round here to lend the little chap some breakfast?" asked Tim. "Why not nurse it yourself?"

The nurse laughed sarcastically at this irregular suggestion.

"You must be a man," she replied. "You're so dull about such matters. Even if I could nurse that baby I wouldn't."

"Why not?" inquired Tim, shocked by the woman's bitterness. "I take that as very unfriendly, nurse."

"How do I know the thing is a baby?" she demanded. "It might be a lion or a tiger. It might suddenly turn into you."

"You embarrass me," replied Tim. "Let's change the subject."

"The subject doesn't need changing," said the nurse, beginning to laugh wildly. "I just changed the subject. See!" And she thrust the baby into Tim's face.

"Nurse, you're getting positively common," asserted Tim in a reproving voice. "What are we going to do about all this?"

"Want to know what I'm going to do?" demanded the nurse. "I'm going to take this child and chuck it out the window."

"My God! Don't do that!" cried Tim, springing from the bed.

He presented an appalling figure in his short hospital nightgown. The nurse took one look at him and then blinked rapidly as if trying to clear her eyes of some painful object that had lodged there.

"Why shouldn't I throw the child out of the window?" she asked. "You're not its mother."

"I know," retorted Tim, "but if you went about chucking through windows every child I didn't bear, the world would be littered with babies."

"Why should you care?" asked the nurse.

"I don't want to be a party to a murder," protested Tim.

"What you've done to me this morning," said the nurse, "is a whole lot worse than murder. Once I was a sane woman and an efficient nurse. Now I'm a gibbering idiot. I wish you could take a look at yourself. A regular scarecrow you are—a scarecrow with long, skinny toes."

Even at that tense moment Tim could not help wondering why his toes should always be singled out for criticism.

"What's the matter with the toes?" he demanded, turning them up for inspection.

"Everything," replied the nurse. "They should have been fingers. They look like withered asparagus."

"God!" gasped Tim. "How revolting. Try to be a little nicer."

She thrust the child into Tim's arms and left the room. While she was gone Sally came rushing in. She was every inch a woman. She took one long look at her husband, then snatched the baby from him.

"You certainly look a sight," was all she said. "Those toes."

"A hell of a lot of gratitude you show me for bearing your baby for you," he retorted.

"Ram is responsible for all," replied Sally, busily preparing to nurse the baby. "He's changed us back."

Tim disappeared behind the screen as the nurse entered the room. She was carrying a suitcase.

"Your wife must have sent this over," she began, then took one look at Sally. A piercing shriek followed.

"Oh, God, how did you get that way?" she shouted. "He's switched on me again."

She ran out of the room and fled screaming down the hall. Within a very few minutes the head nurse and the house surgeon arrived. Sally ducked behind the screen and pushed Tim into view.

"How did you manage it?" asked the surgeon.

"What?" asked the startled Tim.

"How did you manage to sneak into this hospital?" continued the surgeon, keeping a strong grip on himself.

"I didn't," replied Tim. "I've been here all the time."

"Then you must be a woman," said the surgeon.

"I am not," said Tim.

"You are so," snapped the surgeon. "Didn't you bear a child?"

"I did," replied Tim. "But I've just recently had a change of sex."

"I'll have to look into this," asserted the surgeon.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," snapped Tim.

"But you must be examined."

"I think you can trust me in this matter," replied Tim, with some show of dignity.

"But I'd like to see for myself." The surgeon's voice sounded somewhat wistful.

"Sir," replied Tim, "you don't know what you're asking. I'm afraid your interest is more personal than professional."

The surgeon left the room.

"This will all have to be hushed up," said the head nurse. "If you wanted to go gallivanting about I can't understand

why you picked out a maternity ward. There's more here than meets the eye, I'm afraid."

"Lots," replied Tim. "And if you don't hurry up and leave this room you'll see it all. I'm going to get dressed."

The head nurse left the room and Sally reappeared. She put the baby down on the bed and took Tim into her arms. His own arms went round her.

"It's good to get you back," Sally murmured. "You horrid old thing."

"I've been through a lot," said Tim.

"I know you have," replied Sally, "but I'll make it up to you. I'll bear you a set of twins."

Chapter XX. Dopey All at Sea

DOPEY THRUST AN INQUIRING NOSE FROM HIS BOX AND SNIFFED delicately at the small bundle. The small bundle made noises and endeavored to snatch at the nose. The nose, as if insulted, promptly withdrew. Presently it emerged again. Two eyes studied the bundle with growing alarm. The thing was actually alive. It might even be capable of inflicting pain. Down went the nose while the body attached to it shivered nervously. The bundle failed to attack. Dopey opened his lids and tried to look up without lifting his head. If he remained quite still, perhaps the bundle might mistake him for a chair or a table or, at least, a dead dog. The bundle was looking at him steadily and intently, but not hostilely. For a few moments the bundle and the dog took stock of each other, then Dopey transferred his attention to Tim and Sally. They seemed to be all right. The bundle had not molested them. In fact, it was allowing itself to be carried in Tim's arms. That suggested helplessness. Helplessness suggested safety. Dopey raised his head, boldly sniffed the bundle, and allowed his nose to be handled. It was rather pleasant. Such small paws could not be dangerous. Then Dopey did a remarkable thing. He crawled out of his box, seated himself beside it, then glanced significantly first at Tim,

then at the bundle, and finally into the box. Although it made him look rather ridiculous the great dog repeated this eye-rolling operation several times.

"Why, the sweet old thing is actually offering his box to the infant," exclaimed Sally.

She found a clean towel and placed it on the floor of the box. Tim carefully laid the baby on the towel. Dopey settled himself grimly by the box and prepared to guard its contents. There was a proud light in his eyes, although his sensitive spirit was slightly dashed by the reflection cast on his person by the placing of the towel. They might have spared him that. A little delicacy would have been more fitting in the presence of a stranger.

Leaving the baby with Dopey, the parents withdrew to the front room.

"He's so maternal," observed Sally, "he might try to crawl in with the baby."

"Dopey has the instincts of a gentleman," said Tim.

"That's more than his master has," replied his wife.

In the front room Claire Meadows was waiting for them. At their appearance she threw several pillows off the divan and disclosed a large baby. The infant was possessed of teeth. It was two years old—almost a hag.

"Listen," began Claire hurriedly. "This baby is mine. I've just succeeded in stealing her back. I've got a splendid idea. You're to pretend it's your baby. Everyone knows you've had one. If anyone wants to look at her, squdge her up a lot and say she's yours."

"Rather tough on the baby," observed Tim.

"It's only for a short time," replied Claire.

"That's good," said Tim. "The baby might not last."

"But, Claire," protested Sally, "we can't very well show a baby with a full set of teeth."

"Show the other end," said Claire. "That's easy."

"You seem to have an answer for everything," remarked Tim.

"I suppose changing our child's sex is also a simple matter?" inquired Sally.

"It seemed to be for you," retorted Mrs. Meadows.

"But, Claire dear," protested Sally, "we're sailing in a few days."

"Then I'll sail with you," cried the resourceful Claire Meadows.

"That's a good idea, too," put in Tim.

"I'm not so sure about that," replied Sally. "Do you contemplate establishing a sort of *ménage à trois?*"

"Why not?" asked Tim lightly. "I feel like sowing some almost frantic oats."

"Is that so?" replied his wife. "Then I'll look around and see if I can't dig me up a serviceable old *quatre.*"

"Two's company, three's a crowd, and four make a vice ring," remarked her husband. "That will be swell."

"Oh, I can dig up the *quatre,*" cried Claire Meadows brightly. "I remembered the name of this baby's father and called him up. He was very sweet about it. He's willing to do anything. We'll take him along."

"That's better," declared Sally. "And if he leaves you stranded, there's always Uncle Dick. He's looking for an American representative."

"Then it's all settled," said Claire. "I'm terribly relieved."

"We're so glad you are," smiled Sally, "but I foresee unseemly if diverting complications."

* * * *

The sun gleamed down on the boat deck. In a secluded corner three dogs, three high-bred dogs sat before their respective dog houses. One glance at those dogs was enough to show that this was not their first crossing. By no means. Those dogs were bored. There was a fourth house, but no dog sat in front of it. Presently a nose appeared, then two timid eyes. They looked fearfully at the high-bred dogs, then turned away. Those dogs looked sinister to the eyes. Have nothing to do with them. Then the eyes rested on the broad Atlantic and watched with great anxiety the approach of a fat wave. This would be the end.

"Oh, my God," breathed Dopey, "is all that water there yet?"

But God did not answer.

The dog scrabbled round in his house and exposed his gnarled rump not only to all who might care to behold, but also to the tumbling reaches of that disconcerting ocean.

Once there had been a certain box on a floor that did not heave . . . ah, well . . . a dog's life was like that.

Dopey sighed and slept, shivering slightly in his sleep as he dreamed of an endless ocean alive with a drove of waves.

RAIN IN THE DOORWAY

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Chapter I. Waiting

THE RAIN FALLING NOT MORE THAN A FOOT AND A HALF FROM the geographical tip of the nose outjutting from the face in the doorway had in it a quality of falsely apologetic but, nevertheless, stubbornly persistent despair.

It seeped under one's nerves, that rain, and left them uncomfortably soggy.

"Like a hypocritical old woman selfishly enjoying her misery all over the confounded house," reflected the face in the doorway. "That last drop actually sighed quaveringly on my nose. It's quite wet, my nose."

The face produced a handkerchief which had withstood, not without scars of service, the onslaughts of numerous laundries, and the wet nose was solicitously patted back to a state of dryness.

And when the face itself was once more disclosed to view from behind its crumpled concealment, no pedestrian on that rain-simmering street paused to view it. Not one pedestrian

gave it so much as a passing glance. This universal lack of interest was apparently accepted by the face without bitterness or regret. It seemed to appreciate the fact that it was the type of face at which few persons ever troubled to look, and even when they did look they found no difficulty in pursuing the even tenor of their thoughts, assuming they had any to pursue. The face was well accustomed to being not looked at. Of late it had much preferred being not looked at. It had felt rather retiring and undressed, as if uncertain of the expression that might be surprised on its unremarkable surface.

This face was the exclusive property of a Mr. Hector Owen. At the moment its moody eyes were staring from lean, bleak features through a vista of rain-drenched twilight upon the untidy prospect of Sixth Avenue at Fourteenth Street. The rumble of the elevated trains on the tracks above formed a monotonous background to his thoughts. Without his realizing it, colored electric lights were flashing in his mind. Eva Le Gallienne's theater kept reminding him that it was still there. A little farther down the street the stones of the armory bunched themselves together in the wet gloom as if desirous of a blanket.

Mr. Hector Owen's chief occupation in life was that of a sort of urban bailiff for a wealthy estate, the owners of which, so far as he could gather, spent nearly all of their time either in jail, in bed, or intoxicated, or in any combination of the three, such as intoxicated in bed, intoxicated in jail, or just simply intoxicated somewhere in Europe, and always in trouble.

There had been times—usually when Mr. Owen was reading letters from the heirs in difficulties or depositing untoiled for funds to their accounts—when he had secretly wished he too were intoxicated in bed or in jail or even right there at his desk. Any one of these places of intoxication would have been a welcome relief to Mr. Hector Owen of the legal profession if not of the legal mind.

Recently there had been increasing agitation on the part of the heirs—probably the disgruntled result of an especially virulent hangover—to transfer the estate from the con-

scientious hands of Mr. Owen to the less human but more efficient management of a trust company. And this agitation had been augmented by the fact that he was unreasonably held accountable for the strange disappearance of one of the estate's most invaluable heirs, one who had mysteriously ceased to offend the public eye. The remaining drunken or bedridden or incarcerated heirs were considerably worked up over this. In the absence of anyone better to blame, they became indignant at Mr. Owen. They demanded that he return to them at once the missing heir. They desired this missing heir not because they had affectionate natures or felt in the least responsible or were in any way decent minded or public spirited. Probably they would have been gratified had Mr. Owen returned the missing heir to them quite dead. In lieu of a death certificate or a dead body, they earnestly desired the signature of the missing heir in order to dispose of enough real estate to enable them to pursue uncramped their lives of lavish debauchery.

Accordingly the shadow of the trust company lay across Hector Owen's business like a threat of suffocation. It lay across more than his business. It darkened his entire life, for without that estate to manage there would not be enough left of the Owen law practice upon which even the thinnest shadow could sprawl with any measure of comfort. That missing heir was essential to the man's continued existence. Also, in a lesser degree, it was essential to the happiness of Lulu Owen, his wife. Of course Lulu had money of her own, but of late Hector had rather begun to suspect that his wife regarded her money as entirely and exclusively her own while the money he made she considered in the light of a joint income in which he held the short end.

This was by no means the only thing he had begun to suspect of Lulu, and these suspicions served to intensify the steadily deepening shadow through which he had been laboring during the last six months of depression. Only this morning a tentative draft of the estate, or trust, transfer had been laid before him together with a covering letter signed somewhat shakily by all of the heirs but one, and that one was still missing.

Inwardly, as he stared misanthropically at the rain-dimpled

surface of the street, Hector Owen cursed the missing heir. The fact that the missing heir was a girl, a girl, young and beautiful though no better than she should be, if as good, diminished neither the size nor sincerity of Mr. Owen's oaths. He cursed her sexlessly and selflessly like God berating the world. While the missing signature of this loose creature prevented him from carrying out the wishes of the other heirs to their entire satisfaction, it did not prevent them from carrying off their estate to some trust company to his utter and eternal undoing. Mr. Hector Owen was not temperamentally equipped to compete for business in the modern marts of law. The estate business upon which he depended had been a legacy from his father, who in turn had received it in the same convenient manner.

Standing there in that doorway, Hector Owen had much more than enough to think about. Any one of his thoughts would have been sufficient to send a heart far stouter than his down for the third time. Especially the one about Lulu and Mal Summers. That was a black thought indeed. A man could not very well walk up to his wife and say: "By the way, darling, yesterday you spent a pleasant but nevertheless highly adulterous afternoon with a dirty snake in the grass by the name of Mal Summers." His wife would promptly accuse him of having an evil mind, after which she would throw things at him and end up by packing her suitcase during a protective fit of hysteria.

Nothing could ever be settled that way. Nothing ever was. Although he was morally certain of his facts, he could confront her with no shred of actual proof. And even had he been in a position to say: "Yesterday, my dear, I enjoyed the somewhat doubtful privilege of being present though concealed while you and one of my alleged friends conducted yourselves in a manner which, to say the least, was disillusioning"—even had Mr. Owen been prepared to make this statement he would have balked at it like a nervous horse. In spite of his legal training his reticent nature, inhibited as it was by all sorts of gentlemanly instincts, would have pleaded with him to remain silent. Mr. Owen had one of those visual minds that beheld in

graphic detail the things of which he spoke. Anyway, he was sufficiently well acquainted with his wife to forecast the nature of her reply. That good lady would indubitably have told him with bafflingly feminine sophistry: "In the first place, you wouldn't have been there if you hadn't an evil mind, and, in the second place, if you hadn't an evil mind I wouldn't have been there myself."

It never occurred to the less quick-witted Mr. Owen to admit quite frankly that he had an evil mind. For some strange and unexamined reason it is an admission few persons care to make, even those whose minds are a great deal more than evil. Yet, if the simple truth were known, everyone has an evil mind when it comes to such matters, and if they have not, they are extremely dumb, or indifferent to a fault.

Hector Owen was neither dumb nor indifferent. His face, such as it was, had looked out on the passing of thirty-eight neat, orderly, uneventful years. Although it was not a face to attract at first glance, it was one that amply justified a second. It was a keen face in a quiet way, keen, thoughtful, and sentient. A trifle long, with high cheek bones, and lips of a rather attractively unplanned pattern. It could look exceedingly mournful, as it did now, this face, and even when the lips arranged themselves in a smile, the blue eyes above responded slowly, as if skeptical of the levity taking place below. This gave to Mr. Owen's smile a sort of double emphasis, and made it something to be pleasantly remembered. It was such a slow, well considered smile that the observer found himself, or herself, in a position to get to know all of it. One felt that one had played a helpful part in this smile—participated at its birth, so to speak.

Among his various other incongruities was the studious dignity with which he moved his five feet eight inches of slim body from place to place. He was by nature a jointy sort of an animal whom God or evolution had designed to assume a lounging attitude towards life, yet Mr. Owen, for some stuffy reasons of his own, had seen fit to set these intentions aside by imposing on his person a bearing of austere restraint. This made it all the more alarming when Mr. Owen, unexpectedly

seized by some lighter impulse, was discovered in the act of twirling experimentally on his toes or thoughtfully moving his feet to the rhythm of some secret melody. In spite of the rigorous restraint he placed upon his actions, he was occasionally subject to these seemingly frivolous seizures. Those who beheld them carried away the impression that they had witnessed something only a little short of a resurrection, and were for the rest of the day depressed by the instability of matter.

In private life Mr. Owen, with the tactful aid of his wife, had come to regard himself as one who danced uninspiredly, mixed even worse, and who understood the social amenities not at all.

However, he had his moments of rebellion—moments when he refused to accept his wife's valuations either of himself or of life, and when he gave inner voice to the opinion that Lulu's friends were for the most part common, coarse, uninteresting men and women who upon the loss of their sexual powers would have nothing else left in life. These moments were not so rare as they were self-contained. Leading so much as he did through his professional activities the lives of others, he had developed an elaborate private or secret life of his own. And this secret life was composed of many and various lives which fortunately for society, but unhappily for himself, he would never live in reality. Of course, it was nothing less than a system of escape set up to provide Mr. Hector Owen with the excitement and self-esteem his days so sorely lacked.

For example, there were mornings when he arose with the well considered opinion that had he the time and opportunity he could become a moving-picture actor of no mean ability. On other mornings he was content to be merely an inspired director. There were other moments when he quite modestly decided that if he only set his mind on it he could dance with the best of them and sleep with the worst. The detached manner in which he arrived at this last conclusion softened somewhat its lewd character. On occasions Hector's suppressed ego would be satisfied with the part of a victorious general leading his troops not only into battle, but also clean through the

lines and out on the other side while even the enemy cheered. The safe arrival of himself and his troops on the other side pleased him a great deal more than the actual shedding of blood itself. The enemy cheering, he thought, was a nice touch. He had no desire to shed the blood of those brave and cheering soldiers.

As a matter of fact, he had no desire to shed any blood at all save that of the missing heir and Mr. Mal Summers, who had become such a humid friend of the family. Mal's blood he would have gladly extracted with an eye dropper. To have observed him seated solemnly at his desk earlier in the day, no one would have suspected that Mr. Hector Owen, the third in an honorable line of lawyers, was happily watching himself in his mind's eye as he busily went about the business of extracting drops of Mr. Mal Summers's blood, searching with diligent patience from vein to vein until not a drop of the unfortunate gentleman's blood remained to foul another nest.

In his more serious moments Mr. Owen saw himself in the flattering rôle of a leader and liberator of men, swaying them by the sheer intellectual vigor of his reason and the measured eloquence of his winged words That he was not and never would be even the least of the characters he felt himself so well qualified to become occasionally depressed him. However, owing to the fact that even while envying the good fortune of one of his creations he was already arranging for himself another career of equal honor and distinction, his moods of depression were of short duration. And inasmuch as no one suspected the man of entertaining such mad thoughts of self-aggrandizement in his seemingly sober mind, no harm was done to anyone, and Mr. Owen was better able to struggle through the day, scrutinizing bills and speculating idly as to the number and quality of the mistresses jointly maintained by the heirs. It faintly amused him to reflect that although he knew none of these women he could walk into their apartments at any time of the year and tell them where their underthings came from, how much they cost, and give each article its technical classification. Occasionally he toyed with the idea of calling one of them up and inquiring how she enjoyed her

last selection of Naughties or if she was making out any better in the recent delivery of Speedies.

Yes, Hector Owen's life was extremely secret and, it is to be feared, not always nice, which is, of course, part of the fun in having a secret life. Good clean thoughts no doubt have their place in the scheme of things, but there is nothing so satisfactory as a good evil one unless it is the deed itself. And this is especially true when the evil thought can be hurled with crackling vigor into the innocuous ranks of a lot of neatly dressed clean ones.

Of Mrs. Lulu Owen it would be perhaps more charitable to say that she was merely a female member of the race, and let matters stand at that. In so far as she presented to the world in the form of an agreeable body those time-honored dips and elevations so commonly found diverting by members of the opposite sex Mrs. Lulu Owen was every inch a woman. True enough, the elevations were threatening to become immensities and the dips were gradually growing less alluringly pronounced. Still, with regular exercise and careful dieting, the charming creature had at least ten good years of sheer animalism ahead of her. After that she would probably become active in a movement whose aim was a constructive criticism of the morals and manners of the young.

Lulu was such a creature of sex that she never found time to stop to have a baby, which shows that the modern conception of the cave man and woman is a totally erroneous one. Cave people got busy about sex only by fits and starts, and these opportunities were much rarer than is commonly supposed. One cannot become very sexy in the presence of a frowning Ichthyosaurus, while one glance at an enraged Mammoth is quite sufficient to make the ruggedest voluptuary forget all about sex save perhaps his own, which, if he is in his right mind, he will remove from the scene of danger as speedily as possible.

Lulu was not at all like a cave woman. She was impurely a modern creation. There was nothing frank about her. Nor could it be said of Lulu Owen that she was lacking in mentality. She had a mind quite definitely her own. It was one

of those small, unimaginative, competently dishonest compositions that can twist its owner out of all tight places while others are left stupidly holding the bag. It is an exceedingly valuable type of mind to have if one wants to live comfortably in the world as it is constituted today. Although adept in the art of registering all the nicer and more conventional emotions, she was capable of responding sincerely to only the most elementary, such as hunger, cold, heat, anger, greed, gratified vanity, fear, and, of course, all sorts of sex stimuli in little and large degree. In short, she was no better nor worse than thousands of other men and women who for lack of a more accurate name are loosely classified as human beings in contradistinction to their betters, the brute beasts.

And the irony of it was that Mr. Hector Owen had always considered her just about the finest woman, the most desirable creature and the loveliest spirit that had ever sacrificed herself to the coarse and selfish impulses of man. Thus it has always been.

As a lover his wife had always found Mr. Owen far from satisfactory. To her way of thinking the bed was no place for vaguely poetic fancies or idly philosophical discourses such as her husband habitually indulged in as he eased his various joints and members into what he fondly hoped would be both a pleasant and comfortable ensemble. It was all quite simple to the lady. One went to bed either to sleep or not to sleep.

It is to be feared that Lulu Owen was not much of a companion. Of recent months her husband had come to suspect as much. Although they carried on more or less as usual, their words ceased to have any special value or meaning. They were merely words dropped at random like so many scraps of paper about the room, then later collected and carelessly tossed away.

Hector was not the man to thrive under this sort of existence. His wife was indifferent to it. As long as men continued to inhabit the world she would have enough food for thought to occupy her mind. Hector was not so easily satisfied. He

was growing afraid to think at all. He was still sufficiently old-fashioned to want his wife to be exactly that, to want her also to be a companion, an audience, admirer, and what not. He did not demand so much in the line of admiration—merely an occasional word or so, a small scrape to make a man feel a little less grim and alone.

When eventually it was borne in on his consciousness that in Lulu he could find none of these sources of comfort, he was surprised no less than distressed. He had married her under the impression that she was a delicately complex creature of many charming moods and fancies. Now he found her no better than a sleeping and eating partner. He might just as well have a great big beautiful cat in the house. A cat would be an improvement, in fact. Cats did not give utterance to hateful, goading remarks and pack suitcases and slam doors and hurl books and talk for hours of their sacrifices in life and the innumerable stitches of clothing they did not have to their backs. Yes, taking everything into consideration, a cat would most decidedly be a welcome relief.

Yet, in spite of this knowledge, there he stood waiting in the rain for this very wife to whom he would have preferred a cat. Certainly, he decided, he would not have stood there waiting for all the cats in the world. Why, then, should he wait for his wife, who was not as good as any one of all these cats? It did not seem reasonable. Why not tell her to go incontinently and blithely to hell for all time, and then walk diagonally across Sixth Avenue to that speakeasy where he could get himself as wet inside as most people seemed to be outside? Better still, why not grab off some wench and ply her with gin and improper proposals? Why not make a night of it? It had been years since he had made a night of it. And then it had not been a whole night, nor had he made so much of it. He still had money enough in his pocket to buy the companionship he lacked at home. Some of these Greenwich Village speakeasy girls were good sports, he had been told—rough and unreliable but good hearted and regular. They understood men and knew how to please them. He would get himself one of those.

Strangely impelled by the fascination and the prospect of immediate release presented by this daring idea, Hector Owen's secret life was about to merge for once with his real one. He cast a swift, bright glance across the street and was on the point of directing his feet to follow the path taken by his eyes when a face peered in at him through the curtain of the rain.

Chapter II. In the Doorway

EVER SINCE HE HAD ARISEN THAT MORNING HECTOR OWEN had been increasingly aware of the presence of his head—unpleasantly aware of it. The roots of his fine, light, strailing hair seemed to be unduly sensitive today. Each root prickled ever so faintly. Taken collectively these insignificant individual manifestations formed an irritating whole. And the scalp in which Mr. Owen's various hairs were somewhat casually imbedded according to no plan or design hitherto devised by God or man showed a decided disposition to tightness. Farther back a dull buzzing like the far-away droning of bees, or more like a wasp in a hot attic, had been accom-

panying his thoughts with monotonous regularity. Taking it all in all, it was a peculiar sort of head for a man to be lugging about with him on his shoulders, Mr. Owen decided. There were too many thoughts in it beating against his skull in fruitless effort to escape. He heartily wished they could escape and give him a moment's peace—especially those thoughts associated with his wife and Mal Summers, the rebellious estate and the trust company, his automobile and its overdue payments, certain life insurance premiums, and, finally, a neat sheaf of bills for the various stitches of clothes that Lulu tragically told the world she never had to her smooth, well nourished back. Yes, there were far too many thoughts.

Also, there was another source of worry in Mr. Owen's mind. This last one was especially upsetting. So much so that Hector Owen almost feared to admit the truth of it even to himself. The fact is, all that day he had been mysteriously experiencing the most confounding difficulty in recognizing faces which from long years of familiarity he had come to know, if anything, too well. At breakfast that morning Lulu's face had presented itself to him as a confusing smear; which was not at all unusual for Lulu's face at breakfast on the rare occasions of its appearance there. What had worried Mr. Owen, however, was the fact that, so far as he was able to make out, there had been nothing reminiscently characteristic about this particular smear moving opposite him at the table. It might just as well have been made by a demon or an angel. There was nothing definitely Lulu about that smear. And even before breakfast his own face, as he had studied it in the bathroom mirror, had struck him as being only faintly familiar. There had been a dimness about its features and a strangely distressed expression round the eyes.

Disconcerted, he had glanced over his shoulder to ascertain if some perfect stranger had not by chance strayed into the room and become absorbed in watching Mr. Owen shave. Some men were like that, he knew—fascinated by anything pertaining to razors and their use. There was something in it. The sandy, crackling sound emitted by severed whiskers was not unpleasant to the ear. He had always enjoyed it himself. The

thought had even occurred to him sardonically at the time that this strange person behind him might be one of the more daring of Lulu's many callers who, unable to wait longer, had preferred to risk the displeasure of the master of the house rather than to offend the laws of common decency. The situation had tickled some low chord in Mr. Owen's nature until he had discovered he was quite alone in the room. For the sake of his reason he would almost have welcomed the presence of a lover.

This difficulty about faces had continued with him throughout the day. At the office his clerks and stenographers, even old Bates, his comfort in times of storm, had displayed only the remotest semblance to their former selves. Then, too, why had he suddenly and amazingly asked himself, or rather his secret self, who for the moment seemed to be sitting unobserved beside him in the elevated train, what business had they on that untidy, jarring conveyance, and why were they worming their way downtown with a lot of damp, uninteresting people? Why had he unaccountably questioned the almost ritualistic routine of a lifetime? Was the world receding from him, or was his mind gradually growing dim, so that only faint traces of the past remained? Something was definitely wrong with his usually clear head.

Now, when this face unexpectedly thrust itself through the curtain of the rain, Mr. Owen was seized with the conviction that he was going a little mad.

Involuntarily he asked: "Do I look much like you?"

"Huh?" replied the face, startled, then added gloomily, "It's wet."

"What's wet?" asked Mr. Owen.

"Me," said the man in a husky voice. "Everything—the hull world."

"You're right there," Mr. Owen agreed. "The world's all wet."

The moist, unadmirable figure that had materialized out of the rain thrust forward a head from between shoulders hunched from sheer wet discomfort, and two gin-washed eyes studied Mr. Owen humbly.

"Yuss," said the man emphatically, but without much expectation. "And I want a nickel."

"What for?" Mr. Owen inquired, more for the purpose of holding his thoughts at bay than for the gratification he would derive from the information.

"Wanter go ter Weehawken," replied the man.

"You want to go to Weehawken." Mr. Owen was frankly incredulous. "Why do you want to go there?"

"I've a flop in Weehawken," said the man in the rain.

"I'd rather die on my feet," Mr. Owen observed, more to himself than to his companion. "As a matter of fact, if someone gave me a nickel, that would be the last place I'd think of going."

"Is that so!" replied the man, stung to a faint sneer. "Where do yer want me ter go?"

"Away," said Owen briefly.

"I will," answered the man, "if you'll slip me a piece of change."

"All right," agreed the other, "but tell me first, is there any faint resemblance between my face and yours? I have an uneasy impression there is."

For a moment the man considered the face in the doorway.

"Maybe a little round the eyes there is," he admitted.

"Only round the eyes?" Mr. Owen pursued with rising hope.

The man nodded thoughtfully.

"Well, thank God for that," said Mr. Owen in a tone of relief. "Here's a whole quarter."

The man accepted the coin which he scrutinized in the dim light.

"It's a new one," he observed. "All bright and shiny, ain't it? One of them new Washington quarters."

"Do you like it?" asked Mr. Owen politely.

"Yuss," replied the man, still scanning the face on the coin. "That must be old George hisself—a fine American, he was."

"Sure," agreed Mr. Owen. "A splendid chap, George, but I've a sneaking feeling that if the father of his country came back thirsty he'd jolly well disinherit his child and start a private revolution of his own."

"How do yer mean, mister?" the man asked suspiciously.

"Simply this," Mr. Owen told him. "If you spend that quarter for a couple of shots of smoke, as your breath assures me you will, there is a strong possibility that you will go blind and won't be able to admire the face of the man who fought for your rights and mine."

The wet figure considered this a moment.

"You must be one of them reds," he voiced at last.

"If you mean one of those snotty little teacup radicals who mutilate horses with nails stuck in planks, I'll take that quarter back," Mr. Owen declared. "As a matter of fact," he added, "I'm feeling blue as hell."

Once more the soggy man studied the face in the doorway. When he spoke there was an altered quality in his voice.

"It's the eyes," he said slowly. "I can always tell by the eyes. Yours don't look so good—look like they might hurt yer even more than mine—inside."

It was an odd remark. Mr. Owen thought it over.

"You have little left to lose," he told the man. "I am still watching everything slide down the skids."

"When it's all gone," the man assured him, "it won't seem so bad. I stopped minding years ago. Didn't have much ter begin with. All gone and forgotten. Don't know where the hell she is or they are or——"

"Please don't," said Mr. Owen firmly. "If you don't mind, I'd rather you wouldn't today. Why don't you go to the Zoo with some of that quarter and see if you wouldn't rather exchange your liberty for the life of a caged beast? I envy the life of a yak myself."

"What's a yak, mister?"

Hector Owen made an attempt, then abandoned the effort.

"It's too hard to describe in the rain," he said.

"Guess yer don't know yerself," allowed the man.

"Are you trying to irritate me into describing a yak for you?" Mr. Owen inquired. "That's childish."

"No," replied the man. "I was just wondering why, if yer so mad about yaks, yer didn't go and look at some yerself."

"I didn't say I was mad about yaks," Mr. Owen retorted. "And, anyway, I'm waiting."

"Yer mean, waiting for a better day ter look at yaks?" the man persisted.

"No," said Mr. Owen with dignity. "Let us not pursue yaks. Sorry I brought them up. I'm waiting for my wife."

"Are the skids under her, too?" asked the man.

"I'm not worrying so much about what's under her," replied Mr. Owen.

"Oh," said the other. "So it's like that. Guess I'll be shoving off."

"Wish I could," observed Mr. Owen moodily. "I object to waiting here like the very devil and all."

"That's all I seem ter be doing," said the other, merging once more with the rain until his voice came back only faintly. "Just hanging about waiting for something to happen, and nothing ever does. I'll drift along."

And the figure, looking strangely disembodied, moved off wetly down the glistening street. Deprived of the conversational relief afforded by the soggy man, Mr. Owen turned to examine the door in which he was standing. He had examined it many times before, but always with an idly inattentive eye. Now, in order to occupy his mind, he looked about him with almost desperate concentration. He would think about that doorway and not about all those other old unhappy things. Inevitably they would return to claim his entire attention, but not now. He would look at things—at anything.

It was a deeply recessed doorway formed by two jutting plate-glass windows. The windows were filled with a discouraging array of uninspired looking commodities, so uninspired looking, in fact, that Mr. Owen would almost have preferred his thoughts. He found himself almost surrounded and borne down by an avalanche of men's clothes in the worst possible taste. They were cheap, they were false, they were fancy. Yet, strangely enough, amid those flamboyant ranks of sartorial futility would appear with puzzling incongruity a stout pair of overalls or a rugged group of roustabout shoes. A wasp-waisted dress suit would find its shoddy shoulders rub-

bing against those of an uncompromisingly honest union suit, a fancy shirt would be forced to endure the presence of one made of sailcloth or khaki. A display of dress studs and cuff links would have as a background a grim row of tin lunch boxes. It was as if the individual who had decorated those windows had endeavored to keep an impartial mind concerning the relative importance of the laboring man and that of his more frivolous brothers who habitually loafed along Fourteenth Street and infested its gaudy dance halls, burlesque shows, and Chinese restaurants.

For some reason the sounds in the street were growing dim in his ears. Gradually the familiar scene around him was becoming strangely altered in appearance. Mr. Owen was giving credence to the belief that he was standing in a new city, in a different doorway, and that nothing and no one in this city bore any relation to him. The buzzing in his head had increased to a torrential roar. He was tingling with a feeling that something not far off now was going to happen most amazingly. Whether it was going to be in the nature of a rescue or a disaster he did not know, nor did he greatly care. He was mortally tired of thinking about himself, his wife, and those confounded heirs.

A heavy-lidded woman sinfully trailing the scent of moist but dying camellias drifted up to the door. For a moment she raised her shadowed lids and looked up at Mr. Owen. Then she spoke to him in a low voice.

"Hello, sad eyes," she said. "What are you doing tonight?"

Mr. Owen was startled by the sound of his own voice no less than by the readiness of his reply.

"Nothing to you, sister," he answered. "I'm waiting for my wife."

"Just a home body, eh?" observed the woman. "A clean little home body."

"The body's clean," agreed Mr. Owen, "but it isn't so very little. And why shouldn't it have a home?"

The woman looked a little downcast.

"I was a home body myself," she said, "once upon a time, but now I just taxi about."

"Well," Mr. Owen told her, experiencing a sudden pang of fellow feeling for this creature out in the rain, "if it's any consolation, you're playing an open game, which is a damned sight cleaner than cheating."

"They're the worst kind," replied the woman wisely. "The only way to get the best of a cheater is to cheat her first yourself. Sure you won't give her a stand-up for once?"

"No," said Mr. Owen. "That's just the trouble. I'm not at all sure. Be a good girl and hurry away without looking back."

Mr. Owen's eyes, a study in conflicting impulses, gazed through the rain after the heavy-lidded woman as she disappeared down the street. Idly he wondered what sort of man she would meet up with that night and what sort of time they would have.

"She seemed to take to me rather," he mused to himself, not without a small glow of inner warmth. "If I stand here long enough I'll become a well known figure," he went on. "I've met almost everybody except my wife." He took out a cigarette and lighted it, his hands cupped against the rain. "The trouble with me is," he resumed to himself, "I let myself get drawn into things altogether too easily."

Slowly the door behind him opened. There was no sound. An immaculately clad arm with a carefully starched cuff at the end of the dark sleeve drew nearer to the figure standing in the doorway. A strong, brown hand, its nails meticulously groomed, politely but firmly took hold of Mr. Owen and deftly withdrew him from public circulation.

Ten minutes later when Lulu Owen arrived at the spot with her excuses already straining on the tip of her glib tongue she was greatly chagrined to discover that Mr. Owen was gone. And only the butt of his still smouldering cigarette gave evidence that he had once been there.

Chapter III. Snatched Through

TO BE UNCEREMONIOUSLY SNATCHED THROUGH A DOORWAY IS almost invariably a disconcerting experience for anyone—espe-

cially when the person snatched has every reason to believe that the door was securely locked, with no living creature behind it of more sinister aspect than a cat, a large store cat whose business lay chiefly with mice. Now, the surprising feature of Mr. Hector Owen's experience was that he felt no sensation of disconcertion at all, or hardly any. His first reaction to the sudden change was one of profound relief. There was an immediate dropping away of anxiety and responsibility, a sort of spiritual sloughing off of all moral obligations. In their place flooded in a glorious feeling of newness, freedom, and rebirth, that buoyancy which comes when one awakens fresh on a fine morning with the knowledge that one has something especially agreeable to do that day. In his quiet, self-contained way Mr. Owen was convinced that he not only felt younger than he had for many a year but also that he was actually younger and looked it.

Quite naturally he was surprised by the size and magnificence of the establishment in which he found himself. He thought at first, from its noble proportions, that he was standing in some celestial railway terminal. The vast space was diffused with a soft yellow radiance shot with currents of sheer elation. There was a fascinating fragrance in the air about him, tantalizing in its diversity. The aroma of coffee, the scent of soaps, spice and perfumes, the vague, indefinable breath given off by new materials, rugs, and furniture, and the pleasing tang of leather goods drifted past his keenly alert nose like so many little unseen sails on a calm, invisible sea.

Only gradually was it that he became aware of the fact that he was standing in what could be nothing in the world other than a spacious and admirably planned department store, but such a department store as he had never been dragged through at the heels of a ruthlessly spendthrift Lulu in some dimly remembered reincarnation.

From a large central plaza broad aisles between handsome rows of counters radiated in all directions like spokes in a giant wheel. And Mr. Owen's roving and rejuvenated eyes noted with a thrill of gratification a number of remarkably good-looking salesgirls standing in happy profusion behind the

counters. From any one of these young women Mr. Owen would have eagerly purchased practically anything he could have induced her to sell.

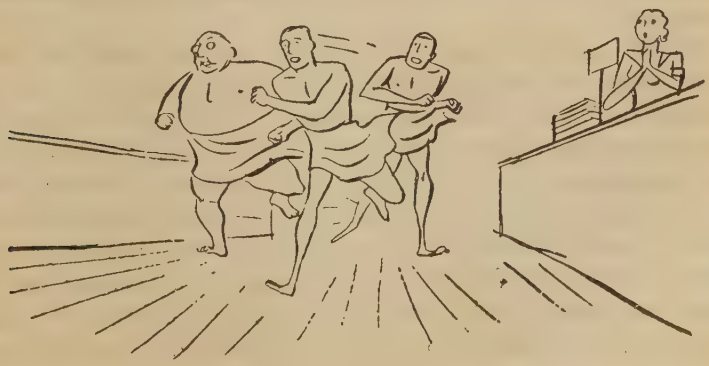
The roof of the store was lofty. Like the sky itself, it curved out from a dim central dome and seemed to run away into mysteriously shadowed infinity. Balcony upon balcony, with gay and graceful balustrades, circled round the huge hall and mounted dizzily skyward, each balcony presenting itself to Mr. Owen's fascinated eyes as a fresh plane of discovery in an altogether new universe. Through wide doorways opening on gracious vistas Mr. Owen caught glimpses of a broad boulevard spiritedly splashed with sidewalk cafés at which men and women were eating and drinking and reading the newspapers and making improper proposals to each other, as men and women will upon the slightest provocation and even without. And who would not make improper proposals in such a delightful atmosphere, Mr. Owen asked himself? He himself would like to make some perfectly terrific ones right there and then to any number of salesgirls. And surely improper proposals were the only proper ones to make when surrounded by so much beauty. Chivalry was taking a new lease on life in

Mr. Owen's breast. He would bide his time, however, before risking any of the proposals he had at that moment in mind.

From the street scene his eyes were attracted by an unprecedented burst of activity taking place at one of the counters near which he was standing. As he watched this activity he decided to defer his proposals indefinitely. It was activity of a decidedly unpropitious nature. Mr. Owen was vaguely aware of the presence of a gentleman standing beside him. This gentleman seemed also to be absorbed in what was going on. His being exuded an atmosphere of pleasant anticipation. Mr. Owen could hardly understand the reason for this because what he saw going on struck him as being anything but pleasant. In fact, it was the very last thing he would have expected to witness in such an obviously fashionable and well regulated establishment.

What Mr. Owen saw was bad enough, but the sounds that accompanied it were even worse. A young and beautiful salesgirl had reached across the counter separating her from her customer and had angrily seized the customer's nose in a grip of eternal animosity. The customer, one of those large, officious, disagreeably arrogant ladies who infest department stores, was emitting a volley of objectionable and highly unladylike noises. But above her voice came the clear, crisp, furious words of the salesgirl.

"You mean-spirited, over-stuffed, blue-faced old baboon, you wicked-hearted old cow walrus," said the salesgirl, "take that and that and that."



The that and that and that designated three separate and distinct tweaks administered to the nose of the customer. Mr. Owen was faintly surprised and not a little relieved that the appendage did not come away in the salesgirl's fingers. He turned to his companion, and was even more surprised to find him murmuring delightedly to himself.

"Good!" the gentleman was ejaculating under his breath. "Oh, very, very good, in fact, capital. Titanic tweaks. By gad, sir, they fairly sizzle."

He smiled upon Mr. Owen, who stood regarding him with dazed eyes.

"Are we both seeing the same thing?" Mr. Owen asked somewhat timidly. "A lady being assaulted by one of your salesgirls?"

"The same thing, my dear sir," replied the man proudly in a voice of polished courtesy. "The same thing exactly. Isn't she doing splendidly?"

"Splendidly!" gasped Mr. Owen. "She's doing it brutally. Nearly murdering the woman."

The gentleman regarded the tweaking scene with an air of professional detachment.

"But not quite," he commented. "Do you see the woman whose nose is being tweaked? Well, she's a most pestiferous old bitch." Mr. Owen drew a sharp breath. "Yes, yes," the gentleman went on almost gayly, "most pestiferous old bitch describes her nicely—a regular she-dragon. And a bully. Attend a moment and you will see something amusing. Watch how she gets hers."

To the accompaniment of chuckles and muttered exclamations of encouragement from his strange companion, such as, "Boost the old bird in the bottom," and "I fancy that old fright will never show up here any more," Mr. Owen watched the she-dragon literally get hers. And he was forced to admit to himself that from the looks of the lady she was getting no more than she deserved. From all directions sales attendants were rushing down the aisles, converging *en masse* on the assaulted woman and showering her with a deluge of violent language. Everyone who could find space on her person to

grab laid violent hands on it, whatever it chanced to be, and the lady was hurtled through the store and hurled out upon the street. Upon the completion of this apparently popular task the group of attendants broke up into individual units and returned quietly to their places as if nothing had occurred. The salesgirl who had started the trouble, now all smiles and helpfulness, promptly began to assist another lady, whose gentle manner, Mr. Owen decided, belied an intrepid spirit, to match a length of ribbon.

Turning once more to his companion, Mr. Owen was momentarily upset to find himself being happily beamed upon from that direction. What manner of man was he, Mr. Owen found himself wondering? Externally, the man appeared to be a person of refinement, not to say distinction. He was no taller than Mr. Owen himself, and of the same general physique, although he carried himself far more debonairly than Mr. Owen had ever dreamed of attempting at his most heady moments.

The gentleman's complexion, Mr. Owen noted, was darkly olive and smooth. Two brown eyes of a subtly insinuating cast, but now eloquent with well being, sparkled and snapped beneath fine, graceful eyebrows. About the man there seemed to hover a faint suggestion of danger, recklessness, and unscrupulous enterprise. Behind the brown eyes glittered, or seemed to glitter, an inner preoccupation with affairs not generally considered nice. The man's hair was smooth, like the rest of him, smooth and black. There was just a touch of scent—not bad—and at the temples a sprinkling of gray. Two rows of white, even teeth formed a background for a pair of firm lips which to Mr. Owen seemed capable of uttering the most hair-raising blasphemies with all the unconscious charm of a child murmuring to itself in its sleep. He was faultlessly attired in a morning coat and striped trousers. There were spats. This last item strengthened Mr. Owen's conviction that he was standing in the presence of a person whom one should meet with reservation and follow with the utmost caution. The gentleman now addressed Mr. Owen in an engaging tone of voice.

"You are, my friend, I see," he said, "somewhat puzzled by the little affair you have just witnessed?"

Catching the rising inflection in the other's voice Mr. Owen assumed his words to be couched in the form of a polite but superfluous inquiry.

"Quite naturally," he replied a little sharply. "I am not accustomed to seeing respectable-looking ladies set upon by a howling mob, and violently flung out of doors. Who wouldn't be surprised?"

"I wouldn't, for one," the gentleman answered equably. "And I could name thousands of others. We're quite used to that sort of thing here."

"Do you mean to say," demanded Mr. Owen, "that you permit your sales people to toss perfectly respectable customers out *ad lib?*"

"More at random," the gentleman decided, eying Mr. Owen with an amused smile, "although your *ad lib* is pretty close to the mark. Furthermore, respectability doesn't count with us here. We find it exceedingly trying." With a shocked feeling Mr. Owen found himself unconsciously agreeing with the speaker. Respectability could be trying. "And anyway," the gentleman was running on, "that old devil wasn't really respectable, not honestly so. She derives her income from some of the most unentertaining resorts—you get what I mean (Mr. Owen was afraid he did)—in town, or rather I should say from some of the least entertaining, for none of them is really unentertaining. Like whiskies, some are merely better than others. I never visit hers myself, but I'll take you to some dandy ones I've recently discovered."

"Aren't we getting a little off the point?" Mr. Owen hastily put in. "We were talking about the lady."

"What?" said the gentleman. "Oh, yes, I forgot. Well, remind me about the other things. We'll take those up later together with several other delightfully vicious resorts you'll find amusing. Now, about that old sea cow—that walrus woman. We simply loathe her. On and off, she's been annoying us for years."

"I doubt if she does any more," commented Mr. Owen, smiling in spite of himself.

"I hope, I hope most sincerely, she does not," the man continued quite seriously. "You see, my dear sir, it is an old trade custom of ours—a tradition, in fact—that whenever customers become unendurably overbearing with any member of our sales force we throw 'em out on their ear regardless of the sex of the ear. It makes no difference with us whether it's a man's ear, a woman's, or a child's. I'm told my clerks call it the 'bum's rush,' but of course I make it a point to frown on the use of such expressions. I find them unnecessarily crude."

"But scarcely any cruder than the actual deed itself," Mr. Owen observed.

"My dear fellow," the other hastened to explain, "that's where you err. That's exactly where you err, if you will forgive my saying so. The action itself was justified. Neither my partners nor I can stand having our store cluttered up with a lot of rattle-brained, vacillating, self-important time wasters and ill-mannered bullies such as, unfortunately, so many persons are who habitually frequent department stores. You must be familiar with the sort I mean," the man went on. "She bustles into the store with seventy-nine cents in her purse and a parcel of goods to exchange and thinks she's God Almighty's social arbiter in the presence of a group of slaves. We chuck 'em out here before they can upset our salesgirls. We don't like upset salesgirls unless upset in the right way and in the right place."

"What's the right way to upset one of these salesgirls?" asked Mr. Owen.

"How charmingly put!" the other exclaimed. "I see you're a bit of a one yourself. Frankly, though, you don't need to upset most of our salesgirls. They seem quite willing to upset themselves with the most alarming alacrity. If anything, they're a little too eager, let us say, for the lack of a better word, to upset."

"I should think," interjected Mr. Owen in an attempt to change the subject, "you'd lose a lot of customers by such drastic methods."

"Oh, we do!" the gentleman exclaimed enthusiastically. "You have no idea. Perhaps that's one of the reasons we're tearing along into bankruptcy. I don't quite know. On the other hand, we believe in giving our customers an even break. We always inform them that they are at liberty to hit any member of our sales force with any object handy whenever the sales person shows the slightest inclination to gratuitous incivility, stupidity, or lack of interest. Whenever we find that a clerk has been knocked cold by several customers in the course of a few days we naturally decide that the clerk is not qualified to deal with the public and so, accordingly, we chuck the clerk out, too. We find it much more natural and efficacious to allow our clerks and customers to settle their little difficulties and differences among themselves. Besides, I find it rather amusing. I do so loathe monotony, don't you, Mr.—er——"

"Mr. Owen," the other replied hesitantly. "At least, I think it is—Hector Owen it was or used to be."

"Well, it really doesn't make a great deal of difference," said the other. "Nevertheless, it's convenient to know. Now, unlike you, I'm almost certain that my name is Horace Larkin—Horace and Hector, quite a coincidence, what? Oh, very good. Am I veering?"

Mr. Owen was looking at his companion with growing alarm and suspicion. The man was giving signs of mental instability which, added to his obvious moral looseness, did not make an admirable combination. Before he could find a suitable reply to Mr. Larkin's childish inanity his attention was diverted by the sight of a large, sinister, wild-eyed individual rushing down one of the aisles in the direction of the nearest doorway.

"Yes, yes," Mr. Larkin was murmuring contentedly, "I do so hate monotony. Now, what can this be about? That desperate-looking chap seems to be in a great hurry to get somewhere else."

The desperate-looking chap was, and as he dashed past the spot where they were standing a glittering object, falling from his pocket, rolled up to their feet. Quickly Mr. Owen's companion stooped and picked it up.

"Dear me," he said in a distressed voice, "someone's been stealing diamonds again. Now, isn't that too bad. No wonder we're going bankrupt. Diamonds are very valuable, you know. The things cost no end of money. Why can't they steal something else for a change—groceries, for instance?"

A large blond gentleman wearing heavy black eyebrows and a fashionably tailored suit of tweeds, and a small, meek-looking individual who in spite of his faultlessly cut morning attire impressed Mr. Owen as being a trifle drunk, appeared in the open plaza and, spying Mr. Horace Larkin, marched up to him with gestures of agitation. Following them was a clerk who appeared totally disinterested.

"I know," began Mr. Larkin without giving the others an opportunity to speak. "And here I was just saying how I loathed monotony. Don't tell me about it. I also loathe being upset and I am going to be upset whether I loathe it or not. You know—that luncheon. Presently we all must go to it. All of us. Even you must go to that luncheon, Dinner." Here Mr. Larkin pointed to the smaller of the two men and added parenthetically for the benefit of Mr. Owen, "His name is Dinner. It really is. Makes things confusing when luncheon comes before or after it, but I can't help that now. Don't tell me," he went on to the others. "We've been robbed again, haven't we? Thieves shouldn't take diamonds. It's not at all sporting. They're too damn easy to carry."

"But don't you think we should induce someone to pursue this beggar?" the large blond gentleman mumbled. "Offer a sort of a bonus thing?"

"Yes," piped up Mr. Dinner, producing a gold flask of beautiful design and helping himself to its contents. "Yes," he continued over the crest of a slight huskiness. "Shouldn't we send somebody after this beggar to shout out in a great voice, 'Stop thief! Stop thief!' and act excited and all?"

Mr. Larkin gazed at the little gentleman with pity and affection, then his expression became serious.

"Why do both of you keep on calling this chap a beggar," he asked irritably, "when most obviously he's a thief of the

worst character? Let's get this straight—did he ask for the diamonds, or did he take them without asking?"

"He took 'em without a word," said the clerk in a bored voice.

"There," resumed Mr. Larkin after a thoughtful pause, "the man must have stolen the diamonds. He's not a beggar."

"He certainly did," owlishly proclaimed the one known as Dinner, once more producing the flask. "And I think someone should scream about it."

"I very much feel like screaming about it myself," observed Mr. Larkin. "I really do. Anyway, we haven't anybody who is especially good at doing that sort of thing—screaming, you know. This chap was running very fast, very fast indeed—tiresomely so. None of us can run very fast, and we all loathe running."

Although the sensation of freedom and well being still persisted with Mr. Owen, he felt, nevertheless, as he listened to all this, that he was going not a little but definitely and completely mad. And the strange part of it was he did not seem to care, rather enjoyed it, in fact. However, he did think it time to interpose a slight suggestion.

"How about the police?" he asked. "Shouldn't someone scream after them?"

Mr. Horace Larkin hopelessly shook his head.

"We also loathe the police," he replied. "In all probability that chap was the police. By this time he has tucked those diamonds in the safe at headquarters. Did he steal many of them?"

"Almost a handful," answered the clerk. "Big ones."

"That's a lot of diamonds," Mr. Larkin murmured regretfully. "I feel very low about losing so many. They were good big diamonds. Is anyone minding the rest of the jewelry?"

"Not a living soul," breathed Mr. Dinner, his eyes growing large. "The counter is all alone. You see, we brought George, here, along to tell you all about it."

Mr. Owen was frankly stunned. These three men must be figments of his own disordered mind. Such simplicity was impossible.

"Dinner, put that flask back or we'll have to carry you to luncheon," Mr. Larkin commanded, then fell silent to ponder upon this fresh problem. "Well," he resumed at last, "that's not at all right. That's almost sheer carelessness. If someone doesn't watch all those precious stones we won't have any left, and that wouldn't look at all well for a big store like this." He turned to the clerk. "George," he said briskly, "you'd better hurry back to those jewels, what there is left of them, and make out a claim for the insurance company. Add as much as you think is safe to the value of the stuff stolen. Don't scrimp. I can't stand scrimping. We may be able to make a not inconsiderable piece of change out of this regrettable incident after all. Waste not, want not. You get what I mean."

Mr. Owen was appalled by the callous dishonesty of Mr. Horace Larkin. Up to this point he had looked upon him as something extra special in the line of lunatics. Now he regarded him in the light of a menace to society in general and to insurance companies in particular. Once more he felt himself called upon to project his greater wisdom and ethics into this mad discussion.

"But such an action," he protested, "would not be at all right."

The suavely polished Mr. Larkin nodded a reluctant agreement.

"It's not right, I know," he said. "I think it's simply terrible myself, but you know how it is. Everybody does it, almost, literally everybody—really nice people. You'd be surprised." In spite of his legal experience, Mr. Owen confessed he was. "And then again," Mr. Larkin added confidentially, "none of us likes insurance companies very much. It's such a bother to pay their premiums, and they get so annoyingly stuffy about it when you don't. You can see for yourself, if we don't cheat the insurance company, we won't make any money on all those lovely diamonds, and that wouldn't be so good for us, would it?"

"But wouldn't it be better," pursued Mr. Owen, "to arrange things so that your lovely diamonds wouldn't be stolen?"

"That's an idea worth thinking about," the gentleman in

tweeds put in, his deep voice carrying a serious, labored note. "How about shooting a couple of customers suddenly just as a bit of a warning?"

Once more Mr. Owen was unpleasantly impressed with his company. Were all these gentlemen dangerous maniacs?

"If we did that," Mr. Dinner objected, "we might find it difficult to induce any of our customers to go near the diamond counter at all. I wouldn't go myself. People don't like to be shot for no reason."

"People don't like to be shot for any reason," Horace Larkin corrected, as if depressed by the unreasonableness of the human race.

"Why shoot 'em, then?" continued Mr. Dinner triumphantly. "Especially since they don't like it."

"But," contributed the blond gentleman, "it wouldn't do any good to shoot them if they did like it."

"It seems," observed Mr. Larkin, "that somebody has to be shot at some time, but don't ask me why. I don't know, and I don't like revolvers. In fact, I simply——"

"Loathe them," Mr. Owen supplied, in spite of himself.

"Yes," continued Mr. Larkin, "I loathe a lot of revolvers knocking about the store. Dinner, here, might take it into his head to shoot up the place during one of his drunken orgies. He's like that." Mr. Owen gazed at the meek Dinner with increased alarm and respect. "How's this for an idea?" Larkin went on, and at this point he fastidiously shot his white cuffs, waved delicately to a passing salesgirl, then turned briskly to his companions. "Suppose," he said, "we run a full-page advertisement in all of the better newspapers stating in bold face type that our diamonds and other precious stones are false as hell and hardly worth the effort to carry away. Someone can think up the right words. This gentleman here, perhaps," he indicated Mr. Owen. "He looks as if he knew a lot of words."

"Wouldn't that be a better advertisement to run about someone else's store?" Mr. Dinner suggested, blinking thoughtfully. "About some competitor, for instance."

"Sure thing," chimed in the gentleman in tweeds enthusi-

astically. "If we ran a whole series of them we might ruin their business."

"No go," replied the suave gentleman. "We can only do that by spreading rumors. If we print advertisements about our competitors we might get into trouble. You see, it's all very well to print lies about our own store, but if we print them about our competitors, they might sue us for libel."

"Be just like 'em, too, the dirty crooks," said the tweedy giant. "Well, here we all stand waiting."

At the mention of waiting Mr. Owen experienced an uneasy feeling that the past was creeping silently up to surround him and carry him off. When had he last been waiting and where? To escape the memory, dim as it was, he turned to his three companions almost eagerly. He would cling to them and go mad in their own peculiar way. Anything would be preferable to that dull, anxious depression lying somewhere behind him in the shadows. He did not feel low any more and for so many months he had felt low—low, spiritless, and disillusioned. Here was no sadness, and certainly it seemed almost impossible to keep these men depressed for more than the lengths of an inane sentence. And surely for their own sakes as well as for the public's, some sober mind should stay with them. For a moment Mr. Owen was seized with the fear that they might forget all about him in their charming way, and walk off, leaving him alone. They needed a sympathetic companion no less than he needed their companionship—someone like himself to see that they did injury neither to themselves nor to anyone else. That idea about shooting customers—now, that was all wrong. It was not a right idea. Although he realized they were not quite sane, Mr. Owen found something insidiously appealing about their special brand of insanity. They seemed to be so perfectly happy in their madness, so contented and busy about it, so full of daft ideas and unhelpful suggestions. Perhaps, after all, they were sane and he had been mad all his life. What did it matter? However, as the deliberations progressed he found it difficult to entertain this idea. These men were mental cases, or else they possessed an altogether new type of mind.

Of that there could be no doubt. Mr. Owen became aware that the blond gentleman was asking questions.

"But look here," the man was saying, "isn't this a bit of a hitch? If we print an advertisement saying that we have a lot of bum jewelry, won't that keep customers away as well as burglars?"

"Not necessarily," Mr. Larkin replied. "I thought that out, too. We can station attendants at the doorways to tell customers not to pay any attention to the advertisement because we were only fooling."

This answer apparently satisfied the objections of the tweeds. Mr. Dinner, however, was stubborn about it.

"But suppose one of the attendants tells a burglar?" he inquired. "We can't very well ask our customers as they come in if they are burglars or not."

"Not very well," Mr. Larkin replied slowly. "That wouldn't put them in the proper mood to buy. Maybe no burglars will come in on those days."

"On what days?" asked the gentleman with the eyebrows.

"On the days when we have to tell our customers who are not burglars," patiently replied Mr. Larkin.

"From the way things keep disappearing in this store," the blond man moodily commented, "I suspect all our customers of being burglars."

"Of course," observed Mr. Larkin, "we steal some of the things ourselves and then pawn them when we're short of cash."

"And we make presents, too," added the blond man. "Fur coats and such like to women."

"I know," Mr. Larkin agreed, "but in one way that saves us a lot of money. I think we're very fortunate to have a nice department store. There's hardly a woman in town who will say no for long with a whole department store to choose from."

"In all the world," supplied the meek Mr. Dinner.

"Then I guess we'll have to let this burglar escape?" said the large man.

"We don't have to let him escape," replied Horace Larkin.

"He will take care of his own escape. In fact, I suspect he already has." He broke off and concentrated his gaze on one of the broad aisles. "But what new diversion have we here?" he asked. "You know, running a store like this keeps us dreadfully on the dash. I'll be glad when lunch time comes, and then again, I won't."

Following the direction of Mr. Larkin's gaze, Mr. Owen watched the new diversion approach with increasing interest. Four beautifully formed girls clad in the sheerest underwear were speeding down the aisle. Behind them sped four decidedly determined gentlemen almost, but not quite, draped in towels. As unprepared as he was for this sort of thing, Mr. Owen was even less prepared for what followed. One of the girls, when about three feet off, flung herself upon him and as far as he was able to establish began to climb up to his shoulders. He had a confused picture of bare arms and legs busily doing things with his body, and even at that moment he could not help wondering if the young woman thought he had a pair of stirrups strapped round his waist. Ducking his head momentarily beneath an energetically upraised knee he caught a glimpse of his companions and discovered with some satisfaction that they were similarly occupied. Mr. Owen's profession had made him more or less familiar with the various physical indications of assault. He found these distressingly present with the difference that the tables were now turned. Even while he was struggling, his legal mind was engaged with problems of what chance a man had for a successful verdict when suing a lady for rape. In a criminal action the man, he decided, would have no standing at all. A man could be so assaulted almost repeatedly without altering greatly either his social or physical status whereas with a woman it might make a lot of difference. On the other hand, no woman would want a husband who was going to be raped all the time. There might be something in that. He did not know. He was much too busy. To steady himself, he involuntarily thrust up an arm and laid a hand on the young lady who was by this time somewhere in the neighborhood of his neck. He could hear the deep breathing of his companions who were laboring with their respective

burdens. No sooner, however, had he seized his fair rider than his hand was smartly slapped.

"Don't grab me so careless-like," she told him.

Mr. Owen was upset.

"How shall I grab you?" he faltered.

"Do you have to be told how to grab me?" she demanded. "Where would you grab a lady?"

"I never grabbed a lady," replied Mr. Owen. "That is, not one in your condition."

"Well, brother, you've missed a lot," said the girl pityingly.

"If you'd stop shoving down on my belt," Mr. Owen complained, "I might barely be able to keep my trousers up."

"I can't," gasped the girl. "If by shoving myself up I happen to shove your trousers down, it's just too bad."

"It's more than too bad," Mr. Owen told her. "It's far more serious than you think. The trousers are not all. In some strange manner you seem to have got your toes locked in my shorts."

"Don't make me laugh," the girl admonished. "I don't want to fall off now that I've got myself comfortably up."

"Ruthlessly up, I'd say," muttered Mr. Owen.

To save his trousers he placed his hands on his hips and stood swaying in front of a number of spectators, many of whom received the impression they were witnessing an act put on by a slightly out of practice acrobat and his partner for their special edification. Strange things were always taking place in this store. Those four men in towels—what were they doing there and why were they being restrained by so many attendants?

"It's all right, girls," Mr. Owen heard Horace Larkin saying reassuringly. "You may come down when you like. The gentlemen are being held. What is it all about, anyway?"

Fortunately for Mr. Owen's trousers his burden was the first to hit the floor.

"Those four would-be cave men wouldn't believe we were working," she exclaimed furiously. "They insisted on playing with us, and they began to take it too seriously. We got frightened and ran. Besides, it's office hours."

"A most commendable attitude to take," replied Mr. Owen, "especially during office hours. Perhaps, only in office hours. Where did this action take place, may I ask?"

"In the swimming pool," said another young lady, springing lightly up from the small body of the prostrate Dinner. "We came in to give our review and found them swimming about without a stitch. They wouldn't believe we were models. Started in right there and then. Would you believe it, Mr. Larkin?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Larkin. "From my point of view, it seems almost inevitable, under the circumstances. You know how easily one thing suggests another. May I ask why you were staging your delightful review in the swimming pool?"

"Major Britt-Britt told us to do it," chimed in a third young lady in scanty attire. "Last night he told us. He said that our department would be closed for redecorating and that until further notice we should hold our fashion reviews in the swimming pool, didn't you, Maj?"

"Call him Major, call him Major," said Mr. Larkin in a low voice. "There're a lot of customers knocking about." He turned smilingly to the Major, who was looking a little uncomfortable under his furious mop of blond hair and heavy black eyebrows. "And I fancy, Major," Mr. Larkin continued, "that from the pressure of business resulting from the universal popularity of this magnificent yet essentially reasonably priced modern mart of merchandise you overlooked the slight detail of notifying the proper authorities that the swimming pool should not be used by our naked customers during the period of the review?"

"It slipped my mind," muttered the Major.

"You big stiff," surprisingly observed Mr. Dinner, rising from the floor and instinctively reaching for his hip pocket, an action which Mr. Larkin was prompt in intercepting, "there's not enough room on that mind of yours for anything to slip off of. That girl nearly tore me to pieces with her great clutching hands. Can't tell me she was as worried about her confounded honor as all that."

"Don't be disagreeable," Mr. Larkin told the little man.

"And don't talk so lightly about a lady's honor in public. It may be a confounded nuisance and a terrific social handicap, but some women still cling to it. What are we going to do about these four gentlemen, now? They strike me as being more offended against than offending. Under similar circumstances, I would have made the same mistake myself."

"You'd have acted worse," proclaimed one of the girls. "Don't I know."

Mr. Larkin coughed loudly.

"Not here," he said rapidly under his breath. "Not here. These people won't understand how we run this store. They're quite, quite narrow, my dear."

"But we told them to wait," one of the girls protested. "We kept telling them we were busy and asked them if they wouldn't wait."

"And they didn't want to wait?" Mr. Larkin asked, interested in spite of himself.

"No," said the girl. "They claimed they couldn't wait."

"They must be in a bad way," Mr. Larkin remarked as if to himself. "We seem to be doing everything in this store this morning except selling goods to customers. Another day like this, and we'll be in the hands of the receivers." Producing a notebook he hastily scribbled an address on a leaf, tore the leaf out, and handed it to one of the toweled gentlemen. "Sorry about all this," he continued easily, "but if you pop off right now I'm sure you won't have to wait. Better get dressed first, though—at least temporarily."

Eagerly making plans among themselves, the four gentlemen hurried off. When a safe distance had been put between them and the models Mr. Larkin sent the girls about their business; then, locking arms with Mr. Owen, he walked off down an aisle in the direction of his private office. Mr. Dinner and Major Britt-Britt followed in like fashion. Thus they made an impressive and dignified exit from the eyes of their admiring patrons, who seemed still somewhat puzzled over what it had all been about. As soon as the door to Mr. Horace Larkin's amazing office closed behind the four backs he turned courteously to Mr. Owen and took one of that gentleman's hands in his.

"My dear sir, I'm sorry," said Mr. Larkin. "I've been neglecting you terribly. What would you like to sell this morning?"

"What!" gasped Mr. Owen. "Do I have to sell something?"

"Certainly," replied Mr. Larkin gently. "We all have to sell something. You're a full-fledged partner, you know."

Chapter IV. The New Partner

"NO," SAID MR. OWEN VAGUELY WHEN HE HAD RECOVERED A little. "I didn't know."

"Neither did we," both Mr. Dinner and Major Britt-Britt said in unison. "Is this man our new partner?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Larkin in the manner of one taking a new automobile out for a spin. "Do you like him?"

Mr. Owen would not have been greatly surprised to hear himself referred to as Model A.

"How did it happen?" he asked.

"Well," began Mr. Horace Larkin, "last night it occurred to me that we could do with a new partner—some congenial chap to share with us our many responsibilities. Do you like my office?"

"What?" gasped Mr. Owen, startled by the abruptness of the question. "Oh, yes. It's lovely."

"I rather fancy it myself," confided Mr. Larkin, gazing appreciatively about him at the huge pillow-heaped divans, the colorful oriental hangings, and the gleaming rug-scattered floor. He even delicately sniffed the scented air. "Isn't that nude stunning?" he continued. "The one with the man."

"They both look nude to me," observed Mr. Owen, glancing at the painting indicated, then hastily averting his eyes in holy horror.

"Yes," said Mr. Larkin simply. "That's what's stunning about it. They're both nude together—mother naked. I do a lot of business here, a lot of interviewing. You understand, with my staff, of course."

"I'm afraid I do," replied Mr. Owen. "If you'll pardon my

saying so, there's an unmistakable suggestion in this office of an old-time barroom."

"Is there, now?" said Mr. Larkin, greatly pleased. "Well, isn't that a coincidence? Because this room is literally alive with liquor. Let's all have a drink."

"Would you mind going on about how I became a partner?" Mr. Owen asked. "I can't help feeling curious."

"Yes," rumbled the monumental Major. "How did you pick him out?"

"Pardon me," said Mr. Larkin. "Pardon me. My thoughts veer so, I'm surprised I don't have a stroke. So I just made up my mind that the first likely-looking gentleman to enter the store in the morning should be our partner and have the privilege of sharing with us our many——"

"We know," interrupted Mr. Dinner rather cynically. "Heavy responsibilities. That, no doubt, will enable you to devote more of your priceless time to your staff work."

"How did you guess?" beamed Mr. Larkin. "Exactly what I had in mind."

"But wasn't I snatched through a doorway?" pursued Mr. Owen. "Or was I snatched through a doorway?" He was groping desperately in what remained of his memory. "Was it

raining when I came in?" he continued. "I'm quite sure I remember the rain—steadily falling rain and a woman with heavy-lidded eyes."

"There was rain out there," Mr. Larkin replied, vaguely waving his hand as if in the general direction of some unknown shore. "But I'm sure I saw no woman with heavy-lidded eyes."

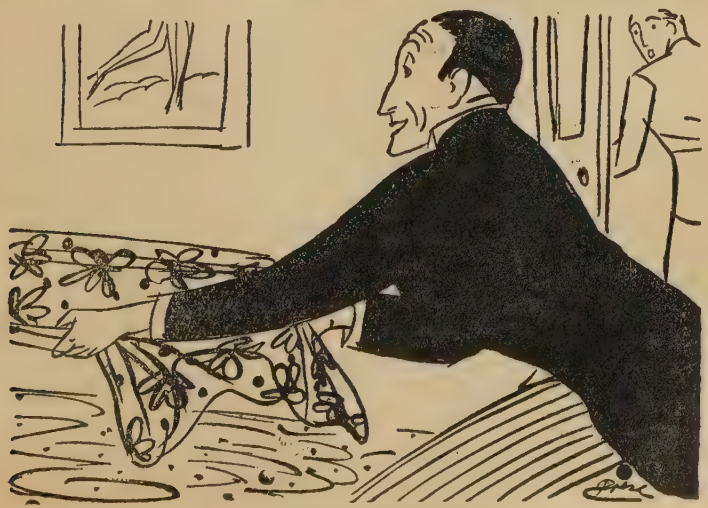
"Lucky for her you didn't," observed the Major, "or you'd have snatched her through, too."

"Is that nice, gentlemen, I ask you?" Mr. Larkin asked in gentle reproach. "I am sorry, however, about this heavy-lidded woman. I am fond of heavy-lidded women. They are born without morals and acquire them very slowly—if ever. Tell me, was she worth while?"

"Seemed like a good sort," said Mr. Owen. "A lonely sort. She was standing out in the rain. I don't think she'd have minded if you had snatched her through. She seemed to be looking for a place to go—a cheerful place."

"We all need cheerful places to go at times," observed Mr. Dinner in an odd voice. "Someone to snatch us out of the rain."

This unexpected contribution from Mr. Dinner gave Mr. Owen to feel that he might just possibly be somewhat dead



and standing in the presence of the latest thing in angels. He could not, however, quite accept Mr. Larkin as God. That would be painting the lily.

"What door did I happen to come through?" he asked a little uneasily.

"I don't quite remember which door it was," replied Mr. Horace Larkin, and this time Mr. Owen was convinced that his vagueness was deliberately assumed. "Some door—one we very rarely use. Saw you standing in it looking rather at loose ends so I took the liberty of dragging you through. The door is not an exit."

For a few moments no one spoke. Mr. Owen was wondering with mingled emotions about the door that was not an exit. Did he really want an exit? Was there a single thing to which he cared to return—a single person or place? All washed out with the rain. There was a woman. He could not altogether forget Lulu. No one who had been forced to live with her could altogether forget Lulu. But what he remembered was bitter and distressful. To visit Lulu was an event; to live with her a disaster. She was a woman like that—popular only on occasions one had no desire to recall.

"I'm glad," he said at last, "you did pull me out of the rain. Your intervention was providential."

"Then everything is quite all right, isn't it?" cried Mr. Larkin. "But you haven't told us what you would like to sell. First, however, let me officially introduce you to your partners —our partners." He turned to the two gentlemen and eyed them with a faintly ironical glitter, then turned hastily back to Mr. Owen. "A thousand and one pardons, your name has entirely escaped me. My thoughts veer so it's a wonder I don't have convulsions."

Mr. Owen thereupon designated himself with that self-conscious feeling of deficiency characteristic of men when forced to pronounce their names in public.

"Owen," murmured Mr. Dinner. "That's an appropriate name to add to this firm. It's all we ever do."

"How clever he is," said Mr. Larkin, as if speaking about a dog. "By the way, you won't mind if we tack it on last? It

will save us from changing the sign. It will read simply, 'Larkin, Britt, Dinner and Owen.' We'll have to shift the 'and' and squeeze up 'Britt.' He needs a little squeezing. Ha! Ha! It's quite jolly having a new partner. I feel better already."

"You're looking well," observed Major Britt-Britt caustically. "A regular human banquet."

"Do I now? That's splendid," replied Mr. Larkin. "Mr. Hector Owen, this is Major Barney Britt-Britt. He gambled his way out of the army. And this is Mr. Luther Dinner, an odd name and an odder type. He is a young and, I suspect, an intellectually feebler son. Myself, the senior partner in everything save sin and age, was once in the show business. We won this store at a poker game."

"Then you weren't trained in the business," said Mr. Owen.

"I should think not," replied Mr. Larkin, as if stung by the very idea. "We're really supposed to do nothing, that is, little or nothing. And we don't do much, really. Running a store like this is a very simple matter. Buy and sell, buy and sell. You'll enjoy it."

At this moment a studious-looking individual hastily entered the room and began to speak without ceremony.

"The accountants for our stockholders," he announced, "have uncovered those hidden assets you told me to hold out on them. They're raising hell about it."

"So would I," replied Mr. Larkin in an unperturbed voice, "if I were silly enough to be a stockholder. Don't blame them. Can't you hide those assets somewhere else?"

"You talk as if you could tuck assets up your sleeve like rabbits," complained the man.

"Do I now?" exclaimed Mr. Larkin. "I must be veering again. Anyway, I never knew you could tuck rabbits up your sleeve. Always thought it was hats. Can't these accountants be bribed?"

"They can," answered the man, "but it's too late now. The cat's out."

Mr. Larkin looked surprised.

"The cat's out," he repeated. "What cat? Didn't know we had one. I'm immensely partial to cats."

"I mean everyone knows," the man exclaimed. "There isn't any cat."

"Oh, then there isn't any cat," Mr. Larkin went on in a disappointed voice. "I'm sorry, but you keep talking about cats and rabbits and things until it's really no wonder I veer. Surprised I'm not revolving." He turned abruptly to Mr. Dinner. "Take a note," he said. "Remind me about cats."

Mr. Dinner promptly produced a notebook and stood waiting with pencil poised.

"What shall I remind you about cats?" he asked.

"To have some," said Mr. Larkin Napoleonically.

Mr. Dinner wrote laboriously in his notebook.

"How's this?" he asked reading aloud. "Remind H. Larkin to have some cats."

The senior partner considered this effort for a moment.

"It's very nice," he said at last, "but it might lead to a misunderstanding in case you were found dead some morning, which I for one hope you are. Change 'have cats' to read 'get cats.' I couldn't very well have cats even if I wasn't so busy. Where were we now?"

"It was about those hidden assets," ventured the man.

"But they're not hidden assets," replied Mr. Larkin, "God pity us all. It becomes harder and harder to get away with a thing. Tell me, don't we owe a number of bills?"

The man merely laughed, but that was as good as an answer.

"I don't see how you can laugh about it," Mr. Larkin complained, "because now we'll have to pay them. Take those unhidden assets and pay a lot of bills. Don't give our stockholders a penny. Ask them if they think this store is a bank, and tell them that once more Horace Larkin has saved them from bankruptcy—no, say, a pauper's grave." Dismissing the man, he turned once more to Mr. Owen, who was looking slightly dazed. "But you haven't told us what you want to sell," continued the senior partner.

"No, I haven't," said Mr. Owen dizzily.

"But you will?" coaxed Mr. Larkin.

Mr. Owen thought rapidly. Toys were rather cheerful things. They might be amusing.

"I might do well with toys," he suggested. "Toys of the mechanical sort."

Mr. Larkin's eager expression fell a little.

"I'm afraid you won't fancy our mechanical toys greatly," he remarked. "Do you want to play with them yourself, or sell them, or does it matter?"

"I don't know," replied Mr. Owen. "Does it?"

"If you want to play with them, it does," said Mr. Larkin. "You see we sell mechanical toys on the theory that they are made to be broken. So we buy only broken ones."

"But what good is a broken mechanical toy?" Mr. Owen protested.

"No earthly good," Mr. Larkin readily agreed. "No earthly good at all, but children seem to enjoy them. However, we can get you some unbroken mechanical toys." He cupped his lips in his hands and suddenly called out, "Horrid! Horrid! Where is that boy? And you, too, Green Mould."

Mr. Owen was certain that the senior partner's mind had slipped completely off its frail hinges until he saw two figures dart into the room from opposite directions and dash up to Mr. Larkin. One was an exceedingly horrid-looking boy and the other was an aged man, strongly suggestive of his name.

"They're mine," said Mr. Larkin with a note of pride, pointing to the pair. "All mine. Nobody else wants them."

Mr. Owen, surveying the unadmirable-looking pair, saw no reason why anyone else should. However, he kept his opinion to himself.

"I can't see that," he replied. "They'd make splendid museum pieces."

"They'd do much better in a graveyard," observed the Major feelingly.

"Or in jail," added Mr. Dinner.

"Give them time," said Mr. Larkin, "and they'll probably be in both. Horrid," he continued, addressing the younger of the two, "I want you to induce Green Mould to go down to the Galleries de la Lune and bring back lots of mechanical toys. Charge them to my account. I buy all my things there,

anyway. They have better stuff than we have, and the prices are much more reasonable."

Mr. Owen looked at the speaker in amazement. The man was as great a danger to himself and his store when honest as when unsuccessfully hiding assets.

"And Blue Mould—or is it Green? I forget which—don't let the grass grow under your feet," Mr. Larkin continued severely to the old man.

"Wot!" piped up the ancient one in a shrill voice. "Right through the pavements?"

"No," scolded Mr. Larkin, "through the floor of the taxi cab. You're going to ride. Won't that be nice?"

Green Mould considered.

"Oo pays?" he demanded. "Ther last time I took er cab fer you it cost me all me cash. God knows when I'll ever get it back."

Mr. Larkin coughed delicately behind his hand.

"Is this the time to speak of trifles?" he demanded, reverting once more to his Napoleonic mood.

"When is?" asked the old man.

"Not now," Mr. Larkin replied.

"Nor ever," muttered Green Mould, shuffling from the room after his companion, Horrid. "Me own money is trifles. His is worse than counterfeit. It don't exist. Oo ever sees it? Yer can play with false money, but yer can't even smell his."

"This is one of those days," said Horace Larkin sadly, "when everyone in the world wants to take our money away from us. I don't like such days. By the way, my dear Mr. Owen, did you ever work for a living?"

"I'm a lawyer of sorts," Mr. Owen admitted modestly.

"Splendid!" cried Mr. Larkin, immediately regaining his blithe spirits. "Fancy that, a lawyer. You should be able to hide practically all our assets."

"He might even find a few," Mr. Dinner suggested hopefully.

"In the meantime," continued Mr. Larkin, "how would you like to sell some books? That's always fun. You'd be surprised at the great quantity of odd people who read books. Some even

buy them. I wonder why? Major, will you take our new partner to the Book Department? Let him knock about there until luncheon."

At this moment there sounded a furious bang on the door. Mr. Dinner moved to open it, but was arrested by the voice of Mr. Larkin.

"If you open that door," he said, "a wolf might walk in—a wolf with a bill in his mouth."

A wolf did walk in, and it was not dressed in sheep's clothing. She was hardly in any clothing at all—a tall, good-looking woman artfully draped in a bolt or so of some clinging material. For a moment she stood arrogantly regarding the partners, who returned her gaze uneasily.

"Am I to fall in a stupor of exhaustion?" she demanded in a deep voice, advancing into the room.

"I hope not," said Mr. Larkin nervously. "Are you? I hate stupors of exhaustion. Why not lie down? There's lots of room."

"Nobody else is lying down," retorted the woman.

"Do you want us all to lie down?" Mr. Larkin asked her rather helplessly. "Of course, we all could if it will do anything about that stupor of exhaustion."

"Why should I wish all of you to lie down?" the woman coldly demanded. "All of you?"

"We don't know," replied Mr. Larkin. "Have you any reason?"

"What reason would I have to lie down with all of you?" went on the woman.

"Oh, my God!" exploded the Major, then made a violent sound deep in his throat.

Mr. Larkin started nervously.

"Don't be like that, Major," he pleaded. "You veer me." Turning once more to the statuesque woman, he asked, "Have you any reason to want to lie down with all of us?"

"I see no reason why I should lie down with any of you," she replied in measured tones.

"Oh," said Mr. Larkin, a little set back. "You don't? I thought you did."

"Do you realize what you're asking me?" the woman continued inexorably.

"No," answered Mr. Larkin hastily. "Or, rather, yes. But for goodness' sake, don't tell us. I feel quite driven to the wall as it is."

"I'd like to drive you through the wall," the woman replied without any show of feeling.

"Would you now?" asked Mr. Owen, glancing round at the walls as if gauging their resistance. "Through the wall. Fancy that."

"I put it up to this gentleman," the woman cried, advancing languorously on Mr. Owen.

"Don't put it up to me," he protested hastily. "I'm new at this business. And besides I have a feeling I'm married."

"What's that got to do with it?" the woman asked scornfully.

"With what?" gasped Mr. Owen as the woman draped two arms round his neck and leaned so heavily against him he was forced to brace himself as if slanting against a gale.

"You know," murmured the woman with a feminine sort of leer.

"My God!" cried Mr. Larkin. "She's coming unwound. In fact, she's nearly finished. Gentlemen, you must leave at once. This is a most important interview. I could never sit through that luncheon unless I got this off my mind."

"It seems the senior partner gets all the breaks," Mr. Dinner observed as he and the Major escorted Mr. Owen to the door. "She's the head of our Designing Department. An excellent piece of goods."

Mr. Owen was not sure whether the man was referring to the body or to the material she had been wearing when she had first entered the office. His parting glimpse was epic. Mr. Larkin was holding one end of the material while the lady, now completely herself, was clinging to the other. Mr. Larkin seemed to be veering again, but this time in the right direction.

Chapter V. Pornography Preferred

MR. OWEN FOUND HIMSELF CAGED BEHIND FOUR COUNTERS. He was literally surrounded by books. As far as his gaze could reach, there were books and still more books. The mere thought of reading even a fraction of them numbed his literary faculties. All the books in the world seemed to have been gathered into that department. He found himself unwilling to open the cover of even one of them. He thought of giant forests denuded for the sake of these books; of millions of publishers and editors crushed beneath the weight of their spring and fall lists, of numberless bookstore owners resorting to theft and murder or else going mad in their efforts to keep from sinking in seas of bankruptcy beneath the steadily rising tide of current fiction. He thought of haggard-eyed book reviewers turning their bitter faces to those strange and awful gods to which book reviewers are forced to turn in the affliction of their tortured brains. He heard these abandoned men calling in loud voices for a momentary recession, at least, of the soul-rotting flood of books. He even thought of authors, and his heart was filled with indignation against that indefatigable, ever hopeful tribe of word vendors. If it wasn't for the diligence of authors so many hearts would remain intact and so many hopes unblighted. Mr. Owen decided it would be better not to think of authors. No good would ever come of it. Also, with a feeling of shame, he thought of the reading public, and his mind began to veer very much in the manner of his senior partners. Luckily his thoughts were taken off the reading public by the conversation of two gentlemen who were fingering various volumes in a decidedly furtive manner. One of these gentlemen was tall, hungry-looking, and artistically untidy. The other was exactly like the first only not as tall. Feeling themselves under scrutiny, the pair looked up guiltily.

"How is *The Broken Bed* going?" the tall one asked in a diffident voice.

"What?" replied Mr. Owen. "I don't sleep in a broken bed."

"No. No," said the other in tones of pain, "I was referring to Monk's latest. I don't care where you sleep."

"Nor do I care where you sleep," replied Mr. Owen tartly, "or if you ever sleep. Please stick to business. You were referring to Monk's latest what?"

"I was referring to the works of Monk," answered the tall person in the manner of a god offended.

"Oh," said Mr. Owen, momentarily stunned. "You were? Well, we don't refer to them here. You must be in the wrong department."

"Do you mean to stand there and tell me to my face," cried the man, "that you don't sell *The Broken Bed* here—not one single *Broken Bed?*"

"I'm rather new at this business myself," Mr. Owen explained, thinking it better to be patient with the man. "But I know they sell broken mechanical toys. They might even sell broken beds. Why don't you try the Furniture Department? If they haven't one there they might be willing to order a

broken bed for you. They might even break one of their good beds. Almost anything can happen in this store."

"My dear sir," said the tall man, evidently deciding to be patient himself, "it seems you don't understand. I am referring to Monk's works."

"I know," put in Mr. Owen, "but I do wish you'd stop."

"One moment," the man continued with a wave of his hand. "This may jog your laggard wits. They recently made him into an omnibus."

"Who?" gasped Mr. Owen, starting back.

"Monk," replied the other triumphantly. "There! They made Monk into an omnibus."

"How could they do that?" Mr. Owen wanted to know.

"Why, they make all the best ones into omnibuses nowadays," he was told. "It's being done."

"But I don't see," answered Mr. Owen. "How could they possibly make this chap Monk into an omnibus?"

"He became so popular," replied the other simply.

"Still I don't see it," pursued Mr. Owen. "Just because a man is popular, why should they make him into an omnibus? Doesn't it hurt terribly?"

"Why should it hurt?" exclaimed the other fiercely. "They just take him and squeeze him together tight and compactly, and there you are."

"I know," said Mr. Owen, unable to keep the horror from his voice. "But look at him. The poor fellow must be in an awful condition. I don't even like to think of it."

"No, he isn't," replied the other, frowning dangerously. "Not if he's properly done. There you have him for all time conveniently at hand—the best of his works. The rest of him that doesn't matter you can toss aside."

Mr. Owen shivered and stared at the speaker with dilated eyes.

"Will you please go away," he said quietly. "I don't care to hear any more."

"Nonsense," spoke up the smaller of the two madmen for the first time. "They made *him* into an omnibus. He's Monk."

"Oh," said Mr. Owen, speaking gently as if to a child. "He's Monk and he's an omnibus, too. What might you be, a tramcar?"

"No," the little chap replied in all seriousness, "but I hope to be an omnibus some day. You know, if they don't make you into an omnibus you're simply no good."

"I shouldn't think you'd be much good if they did," observed Mr. Owen. "Why don't you run along now and play in the Toy Department?"

"What do you think we are," cried the tall lunatic, "children?"

"Not at all," Mr. Owen said soothingly. "You're an omnibus all right. I can see that at a glance. But don't you think you'd be happier in our Motor Vehicle Department? You might run into a Mack truck there. Wouldn't that be fun?"

Upon the reception of this suggestion the tall man uttered a loud complaint and dashed off wildly through the store, pushing and being pushed. The little chap followed him. A good looking salesgirl sidled up to Mr. Owen and invited incredible confidences with her wickedly shadowed eyes.

"You're the new partner," she began, "aren't you? What was troubling those two half-wits?"

"One kept telling me he was an omnibus," faltered Mr. Owen. "And when I admitted he was—called him one, in fact—he started in screaming and ran away."

The girl smiled sympathetically and patted Mr. Owen's arm.

"Don't mind them," she replied. "They're just a couple of authors. You know, they come around here and innocently ask how their books are going, and then get mad as hell because we haven't even heard of them. They should tell us they're authors, in the first place. Then we could think up some comforting lie."

"But this chap insisted he was an omnibus," Mr. Owen continued. "Said they did things to his—his—I forget now, but however it was, they did things to the best of him and then he was an omnibus."

"This is an omnibus," the girl explained, picking up a stout volume. "It's one of those quaint ideas that occasionally get the best of publishers. Whenever an author isn't good enough to have his old books bought individually and still isn't rotten enough to be taken off the list entirely they publish an omnibus volume of his stuff, and surprisingly few people ever buy it."

"Oh," said Mr. Owen. "Then I was a little wrong. He started in with asking for a broken bed."

"That's Monk's latest drip," the girl told him. "It doesn't matter, though. He didn't want to buy it. He was seeking information."

At this moment a middle-aged lady sailed up to the counter and knocked off several books which she failed to replace. The salesgirl eyed her.

"What would be nice for a young lady sick in bed?" she demanded in a scolding voice.

"How about a good dose of salts, lady?" the girl replied promptly out of the side of her mouth, and winked at the shocked Mr. Owen.

"Or a nice young man?" chimed in another salesgirl.

"I'll have you to know this young lady comes from one of the best families," the woman retorted indignantly.

"Why did they kick her out?" Mr. Owen's companion wanted to know.

"They didn't kick her out," cried the woman.

"Then how did she get to know you?" the other girl inquired.

"Are you deliberately trying to insult me?" the woman demanded in a voice of rage.

"I was," said the girl with the shadow-stained eyes, "but I've given it up."

"I asked," said the woman, struggling to control her words and mixing them completely. "What would be nice to give to a sick book in bed?"

"A worm, lady," replied Owen's friend. "A bookworm—a nice, succulent bookworm."

"But can't you understand?" cried the woman. "I don't want worms."

"Neither do lots of other people," the girl replied philosophically, "but they can't help themselves. I didn't know you had worms."

"But I haven't any worms," said the woman.

"Then why don't you want some?" she was asked.

"Who wants worms?" snapped the woman.

"Perhaps this woman is trying to sell you some of her worms," Mr. Owen suggested.

"That's an idea, too," agreed the girl. "Say, lady, are you trying to sell me some worms?"

"Certainly not!" expostulated the woman. "I don't want to sell some worms."

"See?" said the salesgirl with a hopeless shrug of her shoulder. "She says she won't let us have any of her worms."

"But I didn't have any worms to begin with," cried the woman.

"Oh," replied the girl, with ready understanding, "you picked them up as a hobby."

"No," declared Mr. Owen. "She means, she wasn't born with worms."

"It's a pity she was born at all," observed the salesgirl. "She and her old worms. Who brought up these worms, anyway?"

"You did," the woman told her. "I asked for a book, and you brought up worms."

"And where did the young lady in bed go?" the girl asked. "Is she still sick?"

"You told me to give her a dose of salts," the woman retorted furiously.

"Did I?" replied the salesgirl. "Well, give her a couple of doses and worm yourself off. This is a book counter and not a worm clinic. I'm tired of you and your worms and your dying young women and all that. Besides, I want to talk to this gentleman. You're in the way. Come back tomorrow when you've made up your mind."

"The management will hear about this," the woman threatened.

"The management has heard," the girl replied. "This gentleman is one of the owners. Isn't he lovely?"

Impotent with anger the woman rushed away.

Owen looked blankly at the salesgirl.

"Is there anything wrong?" he asked her.

"Oh, no," she replied, her eyes gleaming with unholy amusement. "There's nothing at all wrong. Can't you read?" Here she pointed to an overhead sign. "That damn fool came to the Pornographic Department. Take a look at this book."

She selected a book at random, turned the pages until she found an illustration, then passed the book to Mr. Owen. He glanced at the picture, gave one frantic look about him, then turned his back on the girl. The poor man's brain was paralyzed by the picture the girl had put under his nose, a picture she should not have looked at herself and which most certainly she should not have shown to him. With the book still held forgotten in his hands, Mr. Owen strove to think of other things. It was obvious to him that he was never going to turn round and face that girl again. What disturbing eyes she had! He wondered whether it would not be better for him to crouch down back of the counter and to wait there until one of the partners came to take him away. Dimly he realized that someone had been asking him a question, the same one, several times. He looked up and discovered he was being glared at by a thin, bitter-faced lady who gave the impression of being mostly pince-nez.

"Do you have the *Sex Life of the Flea?*" the woman asked sharply.

Mr. Owen now noticed that the woman held a slip of paper and a pencil in her hands. "My God," he wondered, "is this horrid old crow trying to interview me on my sex life? What a place this is."

"No, lady," he answered disgustedly. "I don't have the sex life of a louse."

"But I must have the *Sex Life of the Flea,*" the woman insisted.

"I hope you enjoy it," he retorted, "but I shall play no part in it. None whatsoever. Personally, I don't care if you have the sex life of a mink."

"I've finished with minks," snapped the woman. "I'm doing fleas now."

"Have you mistaken me for a bull flea or whatever the he's are called, by any chance?" he shot back. "Or have you gone batty like everyone else? If you want a flea's sex life why not take up with some unmarried flea and have done with it?"

"You've gone batty yourself," retorted the woman.

"Madam," he replied, "I certainly have. Now, run away and look for this flea. I'm busy."

The woman sniffed, tossed back her head, and subjected Mr. Owen to a parting glare.

"You," she said witheringly, "would not even understand the sex life of the Bumpers—*Chloroscombrus chrysurus.*"

"I doubt it," admitted Mr. Owen. "It doesn't sound very restrained."

"And as for the courtship of the Squid," she tossed in for good measure as she prepared to march away, "I know you are ignorant of that."

"I'm not alone in my darkness, madam," he told her a little nettled, "and, furthermore, I'm not a Peeping Tom."

"Will you kindly hold that book a little higher?" a fresh voice asked at his other side. "I want to study the detail of the illustration."

Mr. Owen wheeled and found himself confronting the gravely critical face of a lovely young girl. With his last shred

of chivalry he endeavored to remove the book from view, but the girl hung on gamely.

"What's the matter?" she asked innocently. "Don't you want me to see it?"

"Of course not," he scolded. "I don't want anybody to see it. Can't look at it myself."

The girl took the book from his now nerveless fingers and studied the picture intently. Fully expecting her to shriek and hurry away as soon as she understood what it was all about, Mr. Owen watched with fascinated eyes.

"Those Arabian lads certainly had some quaint ideas," she observed in a casually conversational voice. "So complicated —almost too elaborate, I would say, but perhaps they had a lot of time on their hands and nothing better to do. And after all is said and done, what is there better to do?"

"Don't ask me, lady," said Mr. Owen hastily. "I wash my hands of the whole affair."

"You seem to find something wrong with this picture," the girl went on. "Is it out of drawing?"

"It's out of reason," he answered coldly. "Please stop memorizing it."

"I don't have to memorize it," the girl replied proudly. "I'm thoroughly conversant with the technique of Arabian erotology."

"Oh," replied Mr. Owen feebly, then prompted by the belief that anything would be better than this clutchingly graphic illustration which they were shamelessly sharing between them, he asked, "would something in Squids interest you, or Bumpers, perhaps?"

The young lady judicially considered this proposal.

"No," she said at last. "I don't think I'd get much of a kick from the erotic life of the Squid."

"Sorry," said Mr. Owen, and he really was. "Then how about something especially filthy in the line of Bumpers? That might tide you over."

"Hardly," replied the girl. "Haven't you a dirtier book than this one?"

"My dear young lady," said Mr. Owen with deep convic-

tion, "they don't print any dirtier books than that one. Even to be standing together in its presence makes me feel that for all practical purposes you and myself are nine tenths married."

"Does it affect you that way?" the girl inquired with professional interest.

"I don't know what way you mean," he replied cautiously. "But I do know I'll never be quite the same."

"You're too impressionable," the girl assured him. "Now, I ran across a book the other day that would have opened your eyes. It was ever so much dirtier than this—to begin with it described——"

"Don't!" cried Mr. Owen, clapping both hands to his ears. "Are you proposing to stand there in cold blood and describe to me a book even dirtier than this one?"

"Perhaps when I've finished," smiled the girl, "your blood won't be so cold."

"Oh," muttered Mr. Owen, panic stricken by the implication in the girl's words. "Oh, dear. Oh, dear. I want to get out of this department. How can I do it? Where shall I turn?"

His hands fluttered helplessly over the books, and all the time he was painfully aware of the fact that the salesgirl with those eyes was observing his distress with quietly malicious amusement.

"Tell that creature all about it," he said to the young lady distractedly and pointed to the salesgirl. "She'll probably cap your story with the Nuptials of the Whale or Everyman's Manual of Rape, for all I know. Don't hang around here any more. I'm in no mood for any monkey business."

"Then I'll call on you when you are," the smiling young lady replied. "I like that sort of business, and it's so refreshing to find a man who is still fresh and unspoiled—you know, not blasé."

"Don't you dare come back," Mr. Owen called after the girl as she gracefully swayed away. "My sex life is null and void."

Apparently the girl did not hear, but various other customers did, and stopped to stare interestedly at this man who

was thus publicly proclaiming his truly lamentable condition.

"I hope you don't mean that," the salesgirl murmured, undulating up to him with her trim, flexible torso.

Mr. Owen, after recovering a little from the effect of the torso, noticed for the first time that a small section of hell had crept into her hair and left its flames glowing among the waves. A dangerously alluring girl, he decided. She was certainly not the proper person to team up with when selling pornographic literature. Especially when illustrated. Or maybe she was. He did not know.

"I wish you'd stop sidling up to me like an impassioned and overdone piece of spaghetti," he complained. "And what has my sex life to do with you, I'd like to know?"

"That's rather a leading question, isn't it?" she answered, a challenging glitter in her eye.

"I don't know," said Mr. Owen. "If it is, don't answer."

"I feel that I must," she told him gently.

"Oh, God!" breathed Mr. Owen.

"So far," said the girl, "our sex lives have never crossed, but they might at any minute."

"What!" cried Mr. Owen. "You mean right here and now? Oh, no they won't, my girl. Nobody is going to cross my sex life in the middle of a department store. You keep your sex life and I'll keep mine."

"But you seem to have no sex life."

"Then don't worry about it. Let the sleeping dog lie."

"What sleeping dog?"

"Don't ask me," Mr. Owen told her bitterly. "Any sleeping dog."

"Oh," said the girl. "I thought you meant your sleeping dog."

"Well, I didn't," he retorted irritably. "I never had a dog either sleeping or awake."

For a moment she studied him appraisingly.

"Did you ever have a girl?" she asked.

Chapter VI. Satin

"I'M SOMEWHAT HAZY ON THAT POINT," MR. OWEN REPLIED. "Seems as if I had. Why?"

"Nothing at all," she answered. "I was merely wondering if your sex impulses had ever been thwarted."

"What's that to you?" he asked.

"Again, nothing at all," she assured him. "Only it makes one a little cracked when that happens."

"You don't look so seamy," Mr. Owen was ungallant enough to observe as he considered the girl's gracious moulding.

"Why should I?" she demanded.

"Don't ask me," he answered defensively. "I don't know whether you should or shouldn't. It's none of my business."

"It certainly is some of your business," she told him, returning his gaze with an appraising eye. "You don't think I'm going to let you or any other man thwart my sex impulses, do you?"

"I don't give a hang about your horrid old sex impulses," he retorted. "Have I tried to stop you?"

"From what?" she wanted to know.

Mr. Owen looked blankly at her.

"From whatever you want to do when you carry on like that," he answered lamely.

"Well," she snapped, "you haven't been any too encouraging. You haven't puffed or panted or rolled your eyes or tried to find out things like other men do."

"Do you want me to rush about after you like an exhausted masseur?" he demanded.

"No," she replied, "but you haven't even insulted me so far."

"Would that be possible?" he asked.

"No," she replied dispassionately, "but it's nice, just the same. A girl gets to expect it. Your partners make indecent proposals whenever they get the chance. Nothing discourages them."

"Do you try?" Mr. Owen asked quickly, surprised by the kenness of his interest.

"Why do you want to know?" she demanded, drawing near the man.

"I don't," he disclaimed hastily. "I don't care if you encourage the War Veterans of the World."

"Who are they?" she asked with sudden interest, then her eyes snapped dangerously. "Oh," she continued, "so you don't care, do you? Well, I'll fix you. I'll damn well lay you out with the dirtiest book I can find."

"Then what will you do?" Mr. Owen inquired.

"Lay myself out beside you," she fumed.

"With an equally dirty book, no doubt," he caustically added.

"Yes," she said, snatching up a heavy volume of *A Thousand and One Nights*. "This ought to settle your hash."

It probably would have, had not Mr. Owen ducked at the last minute. *A Thousand and One Nights* consequently descended upon the head of a near-sighted but otherwise unremarkable gentleman, whose nose, previously nearly buried in

a book, was now completely interred. When presently the nose found strength enough to rise from its lewd resting place, the gentleman behind it glared at the innocent Owen through tears of rage and pain.

"That," said the man, as if explaining the incident to himself, "was an unnecessarily dirty trick."

"It was an unnecessarily dirty book," Mr. Owen replied soothingly. "It barely missed my head."

"Well, here's one you won't miss," grated the gentleman, and before Mr. Owen could duck he received full upon the top of his skull the entire contents of Fanny Hill, illustrations and all. As he staggered back from the blow he felt a heavy tome being slipped into his hand. Several other salesgirls were arming themselves with erotic literature for the defense of their assaulted leader.

"Pat him with this," a voice said in Mr. Owen's ear. "It's a bronze-bound Boccaccio. If that doesn't settle his hash I'll have a swell Rabelais ready."

"You're bound to settle somebody's hash," Mr. Owen muttered with a grunt as he drove Boccaccio down upon the other gentleman's head. "Better his hash than mine. I hope that did it!"

Apparently it had. The twice-flattened nose descended to rise no more of its own volition. Boccaccio had made a lasting impression. The body was speedily removed, and business went on as usual. Mr. Owen thanked the salesgirls for their ready support, then turned back to the one who had made him her special province.

"Just where were we?" he asked, then remembering that they had not been at such an agreeable place, added, "Let's begin a little farther back."

"How much farther back?" she asked. "Before all this rotten pornography?"

"Oh," said Mr. Owen hopefully, "then you're not so fond of pornography yourself?"

For a moment the girl looked at him defiantly.

"Suppose I'm not?" she demanded. "I can take it or leave it, just as I like. You don't have to wallow in pornography to be

pornographic yourself. I'm a very erotic woman, I am. So erotic I can hardly stand being in the same section with you. I don't know what might happen."

"Don't let it," pleaded Mr. Owen. "I haven't quite found my sea legs yet."

"You haven't even looked at my land ones," the girl shot back.

"Let's not go into that any more," he begged her. "Do you mean that you find it difficult to be caged in here with me, or would you experience the same feeling with just any other man?"

"With any other man," she replied, "so long as he wasn't dead or too badly damaged."

Mr. Owen's face fell. His disappointment was obvious.

"Oh," he said somewhat flatly, "that's nice if you like it."

"Not that you don't affect me differently," she went on, smiling up at him. "I find my sex life rapidly approaching yours. It may be today. It may be tomorrow. It may be the next day at the very latest. Whenever it is, they're going to meet like a couple of ten-ton trucks."

"Does it necessarily have to be as violent as all that?" he asked uneasily. "Sounds sort of rough to me."

"It will be rough enough, no fear," she replied. "There's something about you that arouses my most primitive instincts. I don't know what it is, but it makes me simply filthy. Feel as if I want to shock you out of your wits."

"You have already," said Mr. Owen, "and I don't even know your name."

"It's Honor Knightly," she told him, "but people call me Satin because of my skin. I'll show you that later—all of it, if you like."

"No," said Mr. Owen, a little terrified. "Only some. It is like satin, though, all smooth and everything."

"You don't know the half of it," she boasted. "I'll open your eyes to something extra special in the line of skin!"

"You're too good to me," murmured Mr. Owen unenthusiastically, as he thought of the tremendous amount of skin

he was slated to see on or before the day after tomorrow at the latest.

"Oh, I get fun out of it, too," said the girl almost gloatingly. "I get a lot of fun."

"I'm sure you must," remarked Mr. Owen. "But, tell me, Satin, do all young ladies about here talk like you?"

"Oh, no," the girl declared. "Most of them are not at all afraid of calling a spade a spade—perfectly unrestrained, they are."

"Not like you," he suggested.

"Not a bit," she admitted. "I like things clean but nice. You know—ladylike."

"Have you a decent dictionary?" a studious-looking gentleman inquired, leaning over the counter towards the girl.

"No," said the girl briefly. "All our dictionaries are indecent. Full of obscene words."

"I know all those," said the man.

"You do like hell," snapped Satin. "How about this one?"

She leaned over and whispered a word in the man's ear.

"What does it mean?" he asked in an awed voice.

Once more she whispered in the man's ear.

"My word," he said, his eyes growing round. "Does it mean all that?"

"And more," the girl replied. Turning to Mr. Owen, who was curious in spite of himself, she added, "Now, if I wasn't a lady I'd have said all that right out loud."

"Thank God you didn't," murmured the gentleman. "On second thought, I think I'll buy one of those dictionaries."

"It's called the Little Gem Desk Dictionary Of Obscene Words," she told him, passing him the book. "It's standard. You'll find it quite a comfort, especially when you're mad."

"I've a friend on the faculty who loves indecent words," the studious gentleman informed her, tucking the book in his pocket. "Of course, when nicely used."

"Most members of faculties love indecent words," Satin declared. "It comes from dealing with the young."

"What are you doing for luncheon?" the gentleman asked her, to Mr. Owen's annoyance.

"Too bad," said Miss Honor Knightly with sincere regret. "I'm dated up today. You see, among my other means of making extra pin money," and here Mr. Owen found himself wondering about those ways, "I act as executive secretary for the Kiarians. They're holding their monthly luncheon today, and I have to take notes of the proceedings. It's an awful trial. I'm glad I know a lot of dirty words. One needs them at a Kiarian meeting, I assure you."

"I should imagine," replied the gentleman, "it would be even worse than dealing with the young. Some other day, perhaps."

"You'd be surprised," Satin informed Mr. Owen, when the gentleman and his dirty dictionary had taken themselves off, "how many invitations I get since I've taken charge of the Pornographic Department."

"No, I wouldn't," Mr. Owen assured her.

"Yes, yes," Honor went on, happily reminiscent. "I'd never suffer from insomnia if I took advantage of all my opportunities."

"Do you ever suffer from insomnia?" he asked, white nights from the past dimly stirring his memory.

"Terribly," said Satin, "when I'm all upset and erotic. But I won't any more now that you are here. There'll be no need of insomnia to keep me awake. I like things clean but nice."

"Oh, you like things clean but nice," Mr. Owen observed moodily. "I'll admit you make them clear enough. I'd never mistake one of your spades for a teething spoon, by any chance. But don't delude yourself. I'm not going to be here for long. I'm going away."

"Then I'm going to ask the partners if they won't give you to me," the girl declared.

"Oh, they'll say yes," Mr. Owen told her, "but it won't mean a thing. They're like that—impulsive. Then they forget."

"But I don't," said the girl. "And your number's up. Don't *you* forget."

"It must be a high one," Mr. Owen answered in a really mean spirit.

She looked at him.

"When my sex has dominated yours," she told him, looking rather mean herself, "I'm going to make you suffer for your rotten little wisecracks. See if I don't."

A page boy appeared to inform Mr. Owen that the partners were awaiting his pleasure. As he prepared to follow the boy he observed with some satisfaction the expression of irritation on Miss Honor Knightly's undeniably pretty face.

"You haven't told me that word," he tossed at her casually. "You know, the one you whispered in the man's ear."

"No?" she replied. "Well, lean over and I will."

Mr. Owen leaned over and waited. Why did he want to know? he wondered. His orderly mind assured him it was because she had told the other man. Was it possible he was morbidly jealous? He felt her breath fanning lightly on his cheek. Her lips brushed the lobe of his ear. Then her teeth seized it and, so far as he was concerned, bit it off. In his anguish Mr. Owen involuntarily released several of the dirtiest words he knew.

"It was none of those," she told him. "And now you will never know."

"How can you talk so clearly," he asked her huskily, "with the lobe of my ear in your mouth, or did you swallow it?"

"How common you are," she remarked coldly. "I don't like vulgar men. The boy is waiting."

Tenderly feeling his ear, Mr. Owen followed the boy to the senior partner's private office. Here he was enthusiastically received and escorted up to one of the largest cocktail shakers he had ever seen. The Major, owing to his strength and size, was wrestling with this frost-coated vessel.

"It's nice to drink a lot of cocktails before luncheon," Mr. Larkin was telling everyone. "Of course, if you drink a whole lot of them you get quite drunk, but then, getting drunk is sort of nice, too."

Mr. Owen received this surprising shred of information with a proper display of interest as he accepted a glass from the hands of the hovering Dinner. After he had swallowed its contents he was inclined to agree with Mr. Larkin.

"It's nice to get drunk before dinner, too," quoth the

Major, his deep voice rumbling pleasantly through the room.

"One can't get drunk before Dinner," the senior partner put in. "Dinner is always drunk."

"No," the small man objected. "He's always getting drunk, but he never quite is—not dead, I mean."

"Come! Come!" cried Mr. Larkin hospitably. "Drink up, everybody. To the new partner and the old ones. We simply have to get skinful to stand that Kiarian luncheon."

"Oh," said Mr. Owen, visions of Satin in his mind and prints of her teeth in his ear. "Is that where we're going?"

"It is," replied the Major gloomily. "I'd much rather take you to a sporting house or a gambling dive."

"So would I," agreed Mr. Larkin. "I told him to remind me about brothels. Now, don't forget everybody, bring up brothels."

Mr. Dinner produced his notebook and made a painstaking entry.

"I have it down in black and white," he announced, looking up from his book. "Here it is," and he read: "Everyone is to remind H. Larkin about brothels."

"That's almost too black and white," observed Mr. Larkin. "In case you were found dead, I wouldn't want people to get the idea I had to be constantly reminded about brothels. No normal man should be as absent-minded as all that, should he? I know I'm not."

"No," said Mr. Dinner, his eyes blinking thoughtfully. "What you need is someone not to remind you of them. Suppose I put down a note like this: Everybody is to try to keep H. Larkin's mind off brothels. How would that do?"

"It won't do," Mr. Larkin replied after a thoughtful pause. "People might get the impression I thought altogether too much about such places, and I wouldn't like that, would you, Mr. Owen? You wouldn't like it noised abroad that you just couldn't think of anything else even if you seldom did."

"Certainly not," Mr. Owen agreed, and tossed off another cocktail. There was nothing out of the ordinary about this conversation. They were all jolly good fellows, sound, sensible men, and they drank delicious cocktails.

"You see?" cried Mr. Larkin. "He agrees with me. Put that notebook away, Dinner. There are some things I should be allowed to handle for myself. Besides, after we've finished that shaker, I think we'll all be primed to call on Hadly at the bank and demand a line of personal credit for our new partner. He has to have some money, you know, or else he'll be spending all of ours."

The two other partners looked at Mr. Owen with frankly alarmed eyes. Evidently it was a decidedly disagreeable possibility.

"No," murmured the Major, "that wouldn't be so good."

"Good," gasped Mr. Dinner. "It would be just awful. Let's rush to the bank."

Chapter VII. Establishing a Line of Credit

BY THE TIME THE LAST QUARTET OF COCKTAILS HAD BEEN drained from what Mr. Owen had at first feared was going to be an inexhaustible shaker but which now he regretted was not, the partners felt themselves suitably set up to call on Mr. Hadly, the president of the bank with which the store did business in its casual way.

"We'll establish a line of credit for you, Mr. Owen," growled the Major like a jovial thunderstorm, "or I'll tear the hinges off the safe with my own two hands."

"And I'll help you," vowed Mr. Dinner. "What good is a bank unless you can establish a line of credit with it, I'd like to know?" As no one seemed prepared to tell him, he added, disgustedly, "They're so drunk I can't even hear them."

"I do feel so good," exclaimed Mr. Larkin. "I believe the four of us could establish a line of anything if we set our minds on it. What say you, Mr. Owen?"

"I say stick to credit," said Mr. Owen wisely. "Once we have our credit we can set about establishing other things—a reign of terror, for example. Some sadistic strain in my com-

position has always craved for a reign of terror. Also, I've always wanted to carry a cane."

"Let's all carry sticks," cried Mr. Larkin. "Heavy ones. They might intimidate that skinflint, Hadly."

He rang a bell on a flower-heaped desk, a girl entered, received the order together with various flattering but uncalled-for observations from all the partners, and in a surprisingly short time returned with four heavy sticks, so large and heavy, in fact, that Mr. Dinner experienced some difficulty in handling his and himself at the same time.

"Speaking of sadism," remarked Mr. Larkin easily, slipping on a pair of light yellow gloves, "did you ever beat a defenseless child?"

In spite of the cocktails, Mr. Owen shuddered as he vigorously shook his head.

"Neither did I," went on Mr. Larkin, "but I've heard it's lots of fun."

"You might try it on my nephew," volunteered the Major. "He's an exceedingly snotty child. Last time I played cards with his father the young scamp pulled four aces from my sleeve."

"Any child should be beaten who does a thing like that,"

observed Mr. Dinner. "Maybe his father put him up to it."

"Quite possibly," replied the Major. "There always was a mean streak in my brother. Anyway, he'd been losing heavily all evening, what with one thing and another."

"If you'll give me a little room," put in Mr. Larkin, "I'll make an honest effort to veer myself through that door. We really must be going."

The senior partner thereupon veered through a private door giving to the street. Behind him veered his three companions, diligently swinging their sticks. Mr. Owen could not remember ever having veered onto so pleasant a thoroughfare. He drew a sharp breath and tried to remember all the things he had ever heard about Paris. This street, he felt sure, was far better than anything Paris had to offer. Surely there had never been such inviting-looking women seated at such convivial-looking tables. And as he walked past them he became inwardly elated on discovering that the women gazed at him with eyes of undisguised approval.

It was jolly to be looked at that way for a change. He could not help wondering if the cocktails had not only improved his mental outlook but also his physical appearance. If they had, he decided to become a confirmed drunkard. Too few women had paid any special attention to him in the past. Only the out-of-luck souls had seemed to drift his way. Now he was coming into his birthright. He was being admired by the opposite sex. And he, in turn, was admiring. He was returning these women's glances with brightly acquisitive eyes. He was lusting after them all. The world at last was his barnyard. Why didn't everyone get undressed and start in to chase one another? He could not decide which one he would chase first. Probably he would try to run in all directions at once.

It was a friendly sort of day, with a fair blue sky overhead. Beneath it the boulevard gave the impression of running away into friendly places. Other streets branched from it. He caught glimpses of spacious parks and plazas and lovely, interesting buildings. It seemed to be the sort of city he would have built himself, had he been given a free hand. Even the theaters wore an especially attractive aspect. One announcement read: "The

only piece of cloth in this show is the curtain." Another play was called *Just As We Are,* and Mr. Owen, looking at the photographs of the girls, decided they would be just like that in this wholly desirable metropolis. He was very favorably impressed with everything. Delighted.

Their progress was necessarily slow, owing to the wide acquaintance of the three partners with various ladies and gentlemen they encountered in the course of their walk. Even Mr. Dinner, as small as he was and as drunk as he was, appeared to be greatly in demand. At one table Mr. Owen was introduced to a lady who in his exalted state impressed him as being the most beautiful woman in the world. When he extended his hand to take hers she deftly slipped her café bill into his.

"Pay that and I'm yours," she said in a thrilling sort of voice.

Mr. Larkin took the bill from the amazed Mr. Owen, scrutinized it closely, then clapped his hand to his forehead.

"Do you mean for life?" he asked the woman.

She shrugged her handsome shoulders eloquently.

"Nobody wants me for life," she replied.

"They might want you," the senior partner declared gallantly, "but, my dear, only a few men could afford to feed you. Is that just this morning's bill, or have you been living here for years?"

"You know how it is," she smiled. "Just dropped in and felt thirsty. Got a bit hungry. Ordered a few things. That's all."

"The way you say it sounds cheap as dirt," Mr. Larkin said, returning her smile with interest. "If you hadn't let us see this bill we'd never have suspected you were sitting there filled to the scuppers with five quarts of champagne—of the best champagne, let me add, not to mention various other small but costly items."

"I know," protested the woman, "but I have to act this afternoon."

"What in, a free for all?" he inquired. "Or are you fortifying yourself for the entire chorus?"

"Oh, of course," retorted the woman, "if you don't care to pay it——"

"But we do," broke in Mr. Owen.

"You mean you do," the Major amended.

Mr. Larkin quickly passed the bill to Mr. Owen.

"I don't know how much money you have," he observed, "but you'd be simply mad to have as much as that."

Mr. Owen did not have as much as that. And it was such a nice day too. A man should have no end of money on such a day as this and in the presence of such a woman. He looked about him helplessly. Mr. Larkin took the bill and called for the captain.

"Charles," he said smoothly, "this is our new partner, Mr. Owen, Mr. Horace Owen—no, I mean Mr. Hector Owen. I grow confused in the presence of so much beautifully concealed champagne. Anyway, it doesn't matter. They both begin with H. Why did I call you, Charles?"

Charles, who was evidently both fond of Mr. Larkin and quite familiar with his ways, bowed and smiled quite happily.

"Has it to do, perhaps, with the presence of Madame Gloria?" he asked.

"Tremendously, it has," cried Mr. Larkin. "The very woman herself. Now Mr. Owen, our new partner, desires very much to sign her check. He will sign the store's name and his own initials, H. O. Even I can remember them. As this bill stands now, it is a worthless scrap of paper. Signed, it becomes even more so. If it doesn't bring money, we may be able to outfit your staff. Is everything understood?"

"Fully," the captain replied with another bow.

"And Mr. Owen gets the woman," went on Mr. Larkin. "Remember that, Charles. She's his until bent with age. This is a monolithic bill. It makes one crawl to think of it. Sign, Mr. Owen, sign."

Mr. Owen signed the bill, and Charles, still smiling, departed with a generous tip provided by Mr. Dinner, who seemed to be the senior partner's peripatetic desk and cash register.

"You owe the firm five dollars in cash," said Mr. Dinner, making a note, "but you might as well give it to me."

"When he gets that line of credit," Mr. Larkin told the small man. "Which reminds me, that line is yet to be got. We must spurt. We must actually tear along."

"Thank you," said Madame Gloria sweetly to Mr. Owen. "I am yours for life."

It was exceedingly indelicate, thought Mr. Owen, the way everyone kept referring to his ownership of this woman, including the woman herself.

"We'll take that up later," he explained to Madame Gloria.

While pondering upon how fast they must tear along, Mr. Larkin had fallen into a mood of deep abstraction. At Mr. Owen's words he looked up thoughtfully.

"Did you say up or off?" he inquired. "The size of that bill makes off almost obligatory." He paused and beamed upon the fair lady. "You may call your friends back now," he said. "I've detected them hiding about in places for quite some time. You've established your line of credit. We must now establish ours. The next time you give a barbecue I hope it will occur to you to stick one of our competitors, or at least wait until we've collected the insurance for some diamonds we lost this morning. Don't know which damaged us most, you or the thief."

As they hurried from the presence of this adorable woman, Mr. Owen was dismayed to see four gentlemen and three ladies converging upon her table from various places of concealment. Then all of them sat down with cries of gladness and anticipatory expressions.

"That's the way we do things here," Mr. Larkin explained. "We boggle at nothing and nothing boggles us. A nice word, boggle. I'm fond of the two g's."

Mr. Larkin said so many things that made any sort of answer seem hopelessly inadequate. Hector Owen was not prepared to commit himself about boggle. He had never considered the word. However, almost any word was a good word on a day like this.

A short time later, in the office of the bank president, Mr. Owen found himself being presented to a large but florid gentleman whose impressively worried expression concealed a weak but generous character. Although habitually called a skinflint by the partners, the appellation had no justification as applied to Mr. Hadly. Anyone who did not immediately re-

spond to the amiable proposition of their inflamed imaginations was automatically classified as a skinflint or worse.

"Well, gentlemen," he began fussily when they had seated themselves in his luxuriously appointed office, "I suppose you have called to see me about those bad checks we took the liberty of informing you about in this morning's mail."

"The liberty!" exclaimed the Major aggressively. "I call it decidedly bad taste. An imposition! Checks can't stay good forever. I say——"

"One moment, Major," cut in the suave voice of the senior partner. "Save that for later. Your words might befog the issue—even sink it entirely." Here he turned to the president and literally showered him with smiles. "You'll forgive the poor dear Major," he continued. "He's such a God damn fool. You were saying in your nice, friendly way something about checks. Ah, yes, I remember. It was something about bad checks, wasn't it? Well, let's not talk about them. We would never get anywhere that way. They're like spilled milk, no good sobbing over them. Let the dead bury the dead. And another thing, we omitted the detail of opening the mail this morning. You see, we take turns, and this morning we forgot whose turn it was. So we didn't open the mail at all. There it still is. Quite unopened. Naturally, we can't go on. You can see that for yourself, my dear, good Hadly."

"Although for the life of me I can't," his dear, good Hadly replied in a weary voice, "I'll try to if you'll endeavor to bend your brilliant faculties on this."

"Did you hear that, gentlemen?" Mr. Larkin demanded proudly. "For once a bank president has spoken the truth." He addressed himself to Hadly. "If you'll overlook those checks I'll do more than bend my faculties. I'll wrap them about anything you may have to say."

"Good!" exclaimed the president. "Wrap 'em around this. Your stockholders have placed in my hands for collection all of the guaranteed coupons for dividends due them since you first took over the store. Naturally, I must do something about it."

"I should say you must," remarked Mr. Larkin, deeply

moved. "You must throw those coupons right back in their double faces. Those coupons are not worth the paper they were printed on. Never were. If the truth were known, the words printed on them are not worth as much as the paper. I didn't make up the words, anyway. As I remember, Dinner did, and he was drunk at the time. Everyone should know that a drunken man's words shouldn't ever be taken seriously. If we believed what you said when you were only half drunk you'd be owing us the bank."

"As it is," replied Mr. Hadly, unable to keep a note of bitterness from creeping into his voice, "I've practically given it to you."

"Well, we've given you things, too," put in Mr. Dinner hotly. "Shirts and socks and even the drawers to your legs. And you still owe us for a mink coat you gave to that foreign——"

"One moment," Mr. Hadly interrupted, glancing uneasily at the door. "Let's save our recriminations for the barrooms. I give you boys credit——"

"How did you know?" the Major asked in surprise. "That's just what we came for. We wanted to establish a line of credit for our new partner. And here you go giving it to us before we've even asked."

"I wish the Major were dead," said Mr. Larkin, gazing dreamily into space as if seeing laid out upon it the large, dead body of his partner. "Everything would be so much simpler then. And if Dinner would only sicken and die, I might even yet be able to snatch a few moments of happiness from life. However——" He broke off with a shrug and turned to Mr. Hadly. "I didn't want it to sound so bald when the matter was first presented to you. It wouldn't have sounded nearly so bad the way I was going to put it—the way I am going to put it, in fact. You see——"

"I'm not going to do it, whatever it is," the president broke in desperately. "And that's flat."

"I should say it is," Mr. Larkin agreed. "So flat it's silly. Now, listen, if you please. No more temper. I don't like it.

You know how I am about temper. Easy on, easy off, or whatever you say."

Mr. Larkin stopped and looked at the president as if expecting an answer. Not knowing what else to do, Mr. Hadly nodded, although he obviously hadn't the remotest idea what he was nodding about. However, he had always found things went better if he nodded occasionally when Mr. Larkin was in full cry. The nod seemed to satisfy the senior partner, for he continued in his best manner.

"You see," he said, "Mr. Owen here, as our new partner, quite naturally has at heart the best interests of the bank with which we do business. Just how we do business and what business it is we do, need not enter into this discussion. We must all remember that. For it is very important that we should not embarrass the issue with facts. As soon as we talk facts we get to calling each other nasty names which are even harder to stand than the facts themselves. Is that understood?"

From the various expressions on the faces he inspected it was almost impossible to ascertain whether it was understood or not. Nevertheless, it was not denied.

"Very well, then," he resumed. "To continue. Mr. Owen, being who and what he is, does not want to give the wrong impression of the bank to our innumerable important friends. He does not want people to think he is dealing with a stingy bank, a penny-pinching, close-fisted, blood-sucking institution such as any bank would be that refused him a line of credit. I hope I'm not boring you with these obvious little details?"

"Not at all," said the president politely. "You've merely sickened me."

"Good!" exclaimed Mr. Larkin. "That's one way of breaking down resistance. But don't start me veering. I'd hate to begin rotating like crops." He paused and cleared his throat. "Nor," he resumed, "does our Mr. Owen want it to get about among his friends and influential business connections that the president of his bank is a man of low character, with the appetite of a swine and the instincts of a torturer. He doesn't want people to say as he passes them on the street, 'There goes old Owen, poor fellow. It's a damned disgrace how that chap's

bankers keep him short of cash. I wouldn't deal with bankers like that if I had to go out of business. Hadly, from what I can learn, is a big hunk of cheese.' It would hurt him to hear things like that. It would hurt us all. But most of all it would hurt the bank. Most of all it would hurt Hadly, here, the president of the bank. And we don't want to do that."

"May I ask," inquired Mr. Hadly in a weak voice, "what you do want to do?"

"Merely to establish a line of personal credit for Mr. Owen," replied Mr. Larkin, "that would enhance the prestige of the bank we honor withour account. I will not permit it to be said that we do things on a small scale."

"You have, of course, collateral to secure this credit?" Hadly inquired more for the pleasure he would derive from infuriating the partners than from any hope of security.

"Are you mad?" three voices screamed in varying degrees of rage.

"You've already ot in those beastly vaults of yours," boomed the Major, "practically everything we own in the world save our women and personal attire."

"Let's beat him up with our sticks," suggested Mr. Dinner, almost in tears. "He's gone too far this time. He'll be asking us for our list of telephone numbers next."

"No," said the senior partner. "I've got something that will hurt him more than that. When my new yacht goes into commission next week we won't invite him to come along. That will break his heart. That will simply burn him up."

"How much does he want?" asked Mr. Hadly wearily.

"How much can you spend?" Mr. Larkin promptly demanded of Mr. Owen. "I mean without stinting—without giving the wrong impression?"

"I don't know," faltered Mr. Owen. "I don't need a great deal. Never had much to spend."

"He doesn't know what he's saying," Mr. Larkin said hastily to the president. "Your sordidness has deranged him. I think he should have for his personal use about fifteen hundred a month."

"Fifteen hundred!" gasped the president. "What does he

intend to do—drink, gamble, and run around with women?"

"What would you want him to run around with?" the Major demanded. "Cows?"

"I don't know," muttered the president. "I don't want him to run around at all."

"No," observed Dinner scornfully. "You want him to stay home and grow old economically."

"No, I don't," retorted Hadly. "I don't mind a man having a bit of fun now and then, but with fifteen hundred dollars a man can't have anything else but fun. Wouldn't one thousand be enough to keep up the prestige of this bank? We wouldn't expect too much, you understand."

"Let's toss a coin to see whether it's a thousand or fifteen hundred," Mr. Larkin suggested.

"All right," replied the president. "A gambling chance is better than no chance at all."

For a few moments the five gentlemen waited uneasily to see who would produce the coin. They waited without result. No one produced the coin.

"Go on," said the Major at last to Mr. Hadly. "You furnish the coin, or isn't there such a thing knocking about this dump?"

"I do wish you'd prevail upon your partners," Mr. Hadly complained to Mr. Larkin, "to moderate their manner of address somewhat. After all, I'm not quite a dog, even though I am the president of a bank. They really do owe me something."

"They owe you everything," Mr. Larkin replied hastily. "As I remarked before, it would be better were they dead and buried in their graves."

"You didn't say a word about graves," said Mr. Dinner.

"No?" asked the senior partner. "Well, I don't greatly care whether they bury you or not, so long as you're dead. However, I can't expect to get everything at once. Give me that coin, Hadly, and we'll toss for this line of credit."

"It's half a dollar," said the banker, looking closely at the coin before handing it over. "I shall expect it back."

"God," muttered the Major. "You're so damned cold-

blooded you could freeze ice cubes in the hollow of your tongue."

"Gentlemen," cried Mr. Larkin, tossing the coin in the air, "I cry tails."

"You would," declared the Major. "How does she lie?"

"Who?" asked Mr. Larkin, forgetting to look at the coin he had deftly caught in his hand.

"The coin! The coin!" cried the Major.

"Pardon me," said the senior partner, gazing down into his hand. "I was thinking of something else. Dear, dear me, now isn't this odd. It fell tails up. Mr. Owen, you're lucky."

"So are we," declared Mr. Dinner. "We can all borrow from him."

"But first he must have a check book," said Mr. Larkin. "Hadly, that's a dear boy, send for some check books. We all want some check books. And ask the head teller to step in. He should meet our new partner."

When the teller appeared, armed with a stack of check books, he was introduced to Mr. Owen. He was a sardonic-looking person with a pair of glittering eyes and a tongue that was awed by no man, regardless of how much he was worth.

"Not at all sure whether I'm glad to meet you or not," he told Mr. Owen. "Your partners' checks are bouncing all over the bank, and now I'll have to play leap-frog with yours, I suppose. Don't you birds ever get tired of spending money? I know I am, of trying to find it for you."

"Our new partner has lots of money to spend," said Mr. Dinner proudly. "He's just established a splendid line of credit, and he owes me five dollars already."

"Write him a check," put in Larkin, "or you'll never hear the end of it."

"And while you're settling up," Mr. Hadly suggested, "you might as well let me have that half dollar back."

"I'd like to sit next to you in hell," said Mr. Larkin admiringly to the president, "but I fear you would pick my pockets even while we shivered."

"Our hands would probably become entangled," replied Hadly, smiling at last, now that the unpleasant business was

over. "Glad to have met you, Mr. Owen. Bear in mind that just because you have fifteen hundred a month you don't have to spend it all."

"Certainly not," said the Major. "We don't expect him to. We have all sorts of ideas about the disposition of his funds."

"I want a check for five berries," Mr. Dinner dully declared.

"Give him his check and let's pound along," put in Mr. Larkin. "That damned Kiarian luncheon has to be outfaced. Come along, gentlemen. We must thud. Drop round to see our new partner, Hadly, old crow. You'll find him immersed in a book in the Pornographic Department."

And with this merry leave-taking Mr. Larkin hustled his partners from the presence of the president of the most powerful bank in the city. At the door Major Britt-Britt paused and looked back at Mr. Hadly.

"When people come to see us," he announced, "especially old and valued friends, we'd consider ourselves lepers if we didn't give them a drink."

The door closed on the president's unprintable retort.

"Oh, dear me, yes," Mr. Larkin murmured happily as they strolled down the street. "That's how we do things here. It gives me a deal of pleasure to do old Hadly in the eye. Just the same, I don't believe all bank presidents are conceived in cold storage. Hadly really is a charming fellow."

"How long does this credit last?" asked Mr. Owen.

"Indefinitely, my dear fellow. Indefinitely," the senior partner assured him. "Forget all about it. We can do anything with that bank except dynamite the vaults. They wouldn't like that."

"Let's catch a spray of drinks before we join the Godly," Mr. Dinner suggested.

"Not a bad idea," said the Major.

"A good idea," agreed Larkin. "Then we'll feel better equipped to establish a reign of terror among the Kiarians."

Chapter VIII. The Burning Beard

"THERE'S NO DOUBT ABOUT IT, I DO FEEL GIDDY," SAID MR. Larkin, giggling behind his hand as the partners pushed their way through the crush of smartly dressed gentlemen in the get-together-room of the Kiarian banqueting quarters. "At any moment now I may begin to veer like a tidy little typhoon. Don't see a face I like. They're all smug and acquisitive. Look! What *is* Dinner doing?"

Mr. Dinner was merely doing what appeared to be the normal thing to a drunken mind. Unable to attract the attention of his friend the Major, the little fellow, stooping over, was vigorously jabbing his cane at his huge partner between the legs of a stout gentleman. This endeavor to establish contact by means of a short cut proved effective but disconcerting. The stout gentleman, looking down to see what was disturbing him, uttered a cry of frightened amazement. What incredible metamorphosis was he going through, he wondered. In his endeavor to get away from whatever the thing was, he turned sharply and thus entangled the cane between the legs of another earnest Kiarian. The Major thereupon seizing the free end of the stick gave it a violent upward tug. The shrieks of the two impaled gentlemen rang through the room. Mr. Dinner, now deeply absorbed in his occupation, which had become in his addled brain a battle of wits and deftness, yanked up his end of the cane with equal determination. The noise the gentlemen made merely whetted his enthusiasm. Even at that late date the situation might have been saved had the two Kiarians not attributed their unhappy plight to the other's deliberate intent.

"Is that a nice thing to do?" one of them demanded furiously, endeavoring to ease himself on his objectionable as well as painful perch.

"Nice," grated the other. "You've nearly ruined me, and

still you keep on doing it. Do you want to get poked in the eye?"

"I don't much care where I get poked now," the other man said in a hopeless voice. "Please stop doing it."

"I'd rather have been stabbed than to have had this happen," his vis-à-vis retorted. "If you don't take that stick away I'll do something to you."

"You are doing something to me already," cried the stout man. "You're doing plenty. Don't twiggle it like that."

"But he isn't doing it at all," a Kiarian spectator helpfully informed the speaker.

"Oh, dear," Mr. Larkin observed reflectively to Hector Owen. "Dinner can think of the damnedest things to do with a stick. Those gentlemen must be in great distress."

"I hate to think of it," said Mr. Owen. "Look how the Major's pulling. He'll cut those men in two."

From the sounds the men were making this was not difficult to believe. Drink had lent strength to Dinner's arms and added to that already possessed by the Major's. The gentlemen, turning on the stick, were imploring their tormentors to abandon this contest in which they themselves had never expressed the slightest desire to participate.

"Oh, very well," said the Major to his small partner. "You can have your old stick."

With this he abruptly released his hold, and the two gentlemen fell weakly to the floor, from which they were presently assisted by a number of sympathetic Kiarians.

"Certainly I'm going to have my stick," little Dinner declared stoutly. "And no big bully is going to take it away from me either."

"May I ask," inquired Mr. Larkin, "how you managed to get two Kiarians on the end of your stick?"

"They got themselves there," said Dinner. "I didn't get them there. Must have thought they were playing horse. I think some of these Kiarians drink too much. Come along. Let's get our badges."

Without even so much as glancing at the tortured men, Mr. Dinner led the way to a table at which an official was importantly giving out badges bearing the Christian name or the nickname and the occupation of the member presenting himself. The senior partner received one that informed the world he was "Larkie" and that he passed his days as a merchant. This trophy he immediately pinned on the back of an innocent bystander. Mr. Dinner's was affixed with strategic craft by

the Major to the seat of another gentleman's trousers. Whenever he bent over, this gentleman announced to the gathering at large that he made a practice of referring to that section of his body simply as Lu. The Major, with much unnecessary adjusting, pinned his badge on the breast of a pretty cloakroom girl who did not seem to mind. Taking it all in all, Mr. Owen decided his partners were men with excessively puerile minds and futile ways. Why they had insisted on their badges and waited in line to get them only to make them objects of ridicule and derision was more than even his somewhat confused mind could understand.

On the way to the luncheon room they were accosted by numerous members who, in spite of the absence of badges, addressed the partners in cloyingly familiar terms, anyway.

"Well, B. B.," cried one gentleman, clapping the Major on a shrinking shoulder. "It does my eyes good to see you, old boy. How's the Little Lady?"

"You must be not only dumb but also blind," the Major told him. "If you ever saw my wife you'd damn well know she wasn't little, and if you'd ever heard her line of talk you'd never call her a lady. Go fawn on somebody else. I don't like that way of talking."

As surprised as he was at this display of brutal frankness on the part of the Major, Mr. Owen was even more so by the language of Mr. Dinner. A gentleman named Buddy was addressing the small man in hearty accents.

"Hello, Lu," this person cried. "Tickled to death to see you."

"You're a liar," said Dinner coldly. "You know you hate my guts."

And with this he turned his back on the much discomfited Buddy. Another well meaning Kiarian had cornered the glowering Major.

"It isn't the heat," this man was saying, "it's the hu——"

But the man never finished his sentence. The Major knocked him down with a single blow, wiped his hand with an expensive silk handkerchief delicately scented with eau de Cologne, and deliberately walked away.

"We can't let them get too friendly with us," Mr. Larkin

informed the astounded Owen. "If we did, they'd ruin our lives."

"I don't see why they want to know you at all," said Mr. Owen, "if you treat them that way."

"You don't know Kiarians," the senior partner replied. "They'd forgive a murder for the sake of prosperity and sell their wives for a boom in business."

"What do you think of our city, Mr. Owen?" a person calling himself Benny wanted to know a few minutes later, during the course of an introduction.

"Tell him it smells," whispered Mr. Dinner, at Mr. Owen's shoulder. "I want to watch his face."

"It smells," said Mr. Owen obediently, and he, too, watched Benny's face. It merely became more foolish, if possible, than it had been before he asked the question.

"You should never have brought him along," Benny told Mr. Larkin when he had recovered from the shock. "He'll never mix with the boys."

"Go away," said Mr. Larkin in a dead voice, "or I'll pull your inquisitive nose."

"But I didn't mean it smells, really," Mr. Owen explained when the man had tottered off.

"I know," replied Mr. Larkin, "but it does when he's around. If you say the first thing that comes into your head at one of these luncheons you're pretty sure to be right."

"Why do you ever come?" asked Mr. Owen.

"To annoy people," said Mr. Larkin, "and to be annoyed in turn. It's good for everybody. Yet sometimes, when I come away from one of these luncheons, I get the feeling it must all have been a dream—that these people didn't really exist but were culled up from a fit of depression. Why, they even sing at one. All together they sing—boosting songs, patriotic songs, mother songs. You'll hear them soon yourself."

Mr. Owen did, and although there was too much of it and the songs were either too optimistic or sentimental, he had to admit to himself the singing was pretty good. Nevertheless, he wished it would stop.

Mr. Larkin enlivened his table by surreptitiously pouring

some essence he had purchased for his cigarette lighter into his neighbor's glass of water. The other partners were as innocent of this affair as was the owner of the water himself. And the owner was a personage of note, a man high up in the deliberations of the Kiarians. His inspirational speeches were listened to frequently and indefinitely. He was a man with a long square beard, lots of white to his eyes, and a deep, beautiful voice. He was large and he was lofty. He was the president of one of the most progressive advertising agencies in town and had grown used to having himself referred to by his initials which through some trick of fate chanced to be W. C. Just previous to the serving of the soup this magnificent gentleman felt himself called upon to discover how well his voice sounded in public today. Accordingly he rose, and with a fat hand holding an unlighted cigar, silenced the singing mouths.

"Kiarians!" he cried. "I am no longer your chairman, your leader."

"Good!" croaked a disguised voice from somewhere in the neighborhood of the sleepy-looking Mr. Dinner.

The bearded gentleman paused, frowned heavily, then filled his lungs with air.

"Kiarians!" he burst forth again, and Mr. Dinner, who had been perfecting the art in secret, promptly began to quack like a duck.

"Kiarians!" cried the man. "Is there a duck in this room?"

"You haven't begun on your soup yet," said the Major in a loud admonitory voice. "What do you want with a duck?"

"I don't want a duck," thundered W. C.

"But you did ask for a duck," said the Major, stubbornly sticking to his guns.

"I asked if there was a duck," the man retorted.

"Well, is there?" Mr. Larkin inquired pleasantly.

"How should I know?" snapped the great man. "There were duck-like sounds in the room. If it wasn't a duck I'll eat it."

"May I eat it if it is?" the Major asked brightly.

"What!" exploded the man. "I have no duck for you to eat. I want to get rid of this duck."

"Will somebody please throw that duck out," Mr. Larkin

called in a voice of authority, then murmured to Mr. Owen, "Isn't this amusing? It's better than I hoped."

"What duck?" asked several earnest voices.

A volley of unpleasant sounds shattered the brooding silence of the room. Mr. Dinner, startled himself by his remarkable performance, appeared from behind his napkin and looked about him with an innocent face.

"Kiarians!" called W. C., now at the end of his patience. "You speak as if I personally knew this duck, as if deliberately I had brought this duck among you, as if this duck were my boon companion." He paused, then flung at them, "How should I know what duck?"

"Lord love a duck!" cried Dinner for no apparent reason.

W. C. shivered. His temper was out of hand.

"I hate a duck," he shouted. "I'd like to wring its neck." A fresh burst of protesting quacking from Dinner greeted this impassioned avowal.

"There it goes again!" cried W. C. "Am I to be mocked by this pest of the barnyard?"

"Maybe he's in your beard," suggested Major Britt-Britt in a penetrating voice, "and is squawking to get out. I know I would if I were a duck."

"I wish to God you were," thundered the incensed Kiarian, "and in the barnyard, where you belong."

"You'd be the first worm I'd gobble," said the Major with surprising self-control, and added thoughtfully, "Even if it killed me."

"Kiarians!" once more cried the bearded gentleman, who had never before been talked down by any man and who proudly refused to be defeated at the bill of a fowl. "Now that the duck has stilled its brazen voice I will again raise mine."

Mr. Dinner was quacking tearfully behind his napkin, but the great man pretended not to hear the sounds. Mr. Larkin was watching him closely, waiting for that inevitable moment when the hand would raise the glass of water to the bearded lips. That moment was not far off. The senior partner held a match pressed to the side of a match box.

"Kiarians!" thrilled the orator's voice, his hand reaching for

the glass. "I no longer govern your deliberations." The glass was raised slightly from the table. "I no longer give you the light——"

Mr. Larkin struck, and as if performing some well polished feat of legerdemain W. C. lifted a flaming glass which promptly ignited his beard. The applause in the room was tremendous. Kiarians rose and cheered. They had never before suspected good old W. C. of such ability in sleight-of-hand. Admirers in the room cried out, but none cried louder than W. C. himself.

"Don't applaud, you damn fools!" he shouted through the fumes and smoke. "Somebody put me out!"

"Do you mean throw him out?" the Major inquired lazily. "Like the duck, for instance?"

Mr. Dinner, in his drunken excitement, was quacking unrestrainedly. Mr. Owen, still undecided whether he was witnessing a trick or a burning Kiarian, remained quietly in his seat. The senior partner had risen and was holding a bowl of soup carefully poised beneath the burning beard.

"Now," he said in a voice of great composure, "if you'll be so good as to lower your head a trifle, then plunge the beard in this bowl of delicious soup, I think we'll have you extinguished in a jiffy. It would be better if you closed your eyes. The fumes will be terrific, I fear."

But before closing his eyes W. C. caught a vivid picture of the city's greatest advertising leader solemnly dipping his glorious beard into the depths of a bowl of soup. What an imperishable memory he would leave in the eyes of the assembled Kiarians! This was the end of his career as a public character. He could never hope now to complete the autobiography which one of his copy writers was doing for him on office time and without extra pay. The eyes he turned on the senior partner were filled with rage and hate.

"What do I care," he growled, "if the soup is delicious?"

Making a virtue of necessity, he bared his teeth in the semblance of a smile for the consumption of the watching Kiarians, then plunged his beard in the soup. Even as he did

so, thoughts of moving-picture comedies of the slapstick variety flashed through his mind. There was a sizzling sound and a burst of smoke and through it all gleamed the white teeth of the advertising genius whose lips were contorted in a maniacal grin. Strong men caught their breath, while weak ones turned away. Mr. Dinner quacked like a duck and sleepily rubbed his eyes. One especially enthusiastic Kiarian cheered in a loud voice, a well meaning display which only seemed to increase the mental anguish of the smouldering man.

"The beard is now extinguished," Mr. Larkin announced. "Pardon me if I cry a little. W. C.'s personally conducted bonfire has made my eyes water."

"It's fairly sickened me," commented the Major in a rough, coarse voice. "Barring none, that beard is the worst I've ever smelled. I'll bet it hasn't been dusted off since Queen Victoria died."

This observation on his personal habits of cleanliness was too much for W. C. He raised his massive head and glared at the Major. The beard emerged from the delicious soup tastefully garnished with vegetables and spaghetti. Mr. Owen, for the sake of his own sensibilities, was moved to offer the gentleman a napkin.

"You wouldn't look quite so awful," he said in a sympathetic voice, "if you used this on what's left of those whiskers."

Automatically W. C. accepted the napkin and thoughtfully applied it to his damaged beard.

"May I do it for you?" Mr. Larkin asked, advancing on the man. "I'd dearly love to dry your poor dear beard."

The advertising genius started back with a cry of horror. The sparks of madness were gleaming in his eyes.

"I'll dry my own beard," he cried through wisps of smoke still straining through the hard dying tangle of hair. "Keep your hands off it. Don't come a step nearer."

"You wouldn't have to ask me twice," Major Britt-Britt informed the world. "It certainly is a mess."

"About the most revolting beard I ever saw," claimed little Mr. Dinner. "I wish he'd hide it somewhere."

"And I wish the lot of you would stop saying things about my beard," the great man retorted. "It's bad enough to have it burned, without having it discussed."

"That's right," agreed Mr. Larkin. "No beard looks its best immediately after a fire. We expect too much of W. C. He's done enough as it is."

At this point Mr. Mark Crawly, universally known as Big Boy, presiding officer of the local Kiarians, deemed it expedient to introduce some semblance of order into all this acrimonious chaos. Mr. Crawly was a nice chap. One could not help liking him a little. He possessed what all Kiarians loved most—a fine front. Inside, Mr. Mark Crawly was just plain dumb, which was no handicap among his fellow members. He could say stupid things in a firm, manly voice and get away with them. Years ago his firm had recognized the value of his smile as a business getter and had elevated him to the position of general sales manager. It occasionally took new members of his staff almost a month to discover that he had only a vague idea of what it was all about. He smiled business in and competition down. Above his desk was a Keep Smiling sign. In the *Nut and Bolt Trade Journal* his words were often quoted. " 'Meet depression with a grin and smile a boom into being,' says Mark Crawly at the Tenth Nut and Bolt Convention." Had it not been for his hard-working subordinates he would have smiled his firm into bankruptcy, but that, of course, was not generally known. Big Boy Crawly now addressed the still slightly smoldering W. C. in particular and the room in general.

"Gentlemen," he began, "we all like and respect our W. C."

Mr. Dinner giggled a little at this, but Mr. Crawly frowned.

"We are sorry about his beard," he resumed, "yet even now I'm not sure whether he did it on purpose or not."

An animal-like howl burst from the advertising man's singed lips.

"Do you think I'd deliberately set fire to my beard," he asked in an impassioned voice, "to amuse you damn fools?"

"I assumed you were trying to amuse us," Big Boy Crawly replied good-naturedly. "It was funny, you know. How did it catch?"

"It was very dry," announced Dinner in a solemn voice. "That beard was a public menace."

"It was nothing of the sort," shouted W. C. "I've worn that beard for years."

"When was it last dry cleaned?" Major Barney inquired.

"It never was dry cleaned," retorted the other.

"I feared as much," said the Major. "The damn thing burned of its own accord like a heath fire. Spontaneous combustion sort of—that's how I figure it out."

"The Major means," Mr. Larkin explained to the room, "that the regrettable fire which broke out in the beard was due to the accumulation of years of débris. Am I right, Major?"

"As always," the big chap replied. "Wonder if he had it insured?"

"Was the beard insured, W. C.?" the senior partner inquired, turning politely to that infuriated gentleman. "Not against theft, of course, but for fire?"

"Bah!" ejaculated W. C. "Bah!"

"He's bleating like a sheep," cried Mr. Dinner, who was professionally interested in animal noises. "There's no end to the things the man can do."

"One moment," called Mr. Crawly. "I asked W. C. a simple question, and you gentlemen have made the thing seem terribly involved. W. C., can you tell us how your beard caught fire?"

"How should I know?" shot back the mighty man in the agony of his soul.

"Aren't you even interested?" Major Barney asked innocently. "I know if I had a beard and it happened to go off like yours did, I'd never rest until I'd discovered the cause. The damn thing might do it again."

"It would be awful to have it happen in bed with a woman," Mr. Dinner observed reflectively. "What would she think?"

W. C. sprang to his feet. Beard or no beard, he would put a stop to this. These people were not going to continue talking about himself and his beard as if neither of them were present.

"Kiarians!" he cried, showing the whites of his eyes. "Let's abandon this talk about beards and turn to other things."

"We haven't settled that matter of the duck yet," Mr. Dinner suggested. "We might take that up."

"Someone was making duck noises," W. C. replied. "I've thought that out, too. There is no duck."

The volley of quacking and squawking that greeted this denial far surpassed all previous demonstrations. W. C. paused and shook himself like a punch-drunk fighter.

"I may as well sit down," he observed at last in a hopeless voice, "if that duck is going to interrupt every word I say."

"It seems to be coming from the direction of your table," a Kiarian called out.

"You look under the table, Dinner," the Major commanded, "and I'll look under whatever remains of his beard. That duck must be one place or the other."

"If you touch my beard I'll cut your throat!" cried W. C., grabbing up a knife.

"A pretty way for a man to talk," complained Mr. Dinner. "We were only trying to help."

"I wasn't going to touch his old beard," explained Major Barney in an injured voice. "I was just going to peep under it."

"Kiarians!" almost screamed the distracted man. "Are you going to allow these ruffians to turn this dignified meeting into a discussion of my beard? Are you going to permit them to torture me about it—to throw my beard in my face?"

"Better than burning it in ours," put in Major Barney.

"Very well, then," called out the senior partner in a conciliatory voice. "Let's table the beard now that he's finished souping it."

"How do you do that?" asked the unintelligent Dinner. "Do you mean flatten it out and iron it?"

"Bah!" exclaimed the great leader. "And bah again."

"Why again?" asked Major Barney. "We heard the first bah, and it didn't mean anything either. I like the duck better."

Mr. Dinner lifted his napkin and behind it quacked his thanks. W. C., with a despairing cry, flung up his hands and sank heavily to his chair. Then he brought his hands down and rested his head in them. He would never appear in public again, he vowed to himself. But he did. He appeared many times

until at last he died in public and had a public Kiarian funeral and then was promptly and publicly forgotten as such men should be.

He could never have been tolerated in private.

Chapter IX. The Kiarians Continue

ALMOST COINCIDENT WITH THE COLLAPSE OF THE EXCELLENT W. C., as that gentleman was commonly called, was the arrival of Honor, or Satin, Knightly. As she walked the length of the hall the eloquent sheen of her frock quoted faithfully the lines of her body. And by the time she had seated herself at a small desk near the speakers' table there was not one of those Kiarian boys who had not committed sin in his heart save, perhaps, W. C., who was muttering things in his beard.

Having been penned up with this girl at close quarters, Mr. Owen now had the opportunity to study her from a distance. He found Satin exceptional in every detail. To be too close to the girl destroyed one's critical faculties. At such times there was room in the masculine mind for the entertainment of only one thought. And Satin herself did not make things any easier. She was far too vividly aware of herself and her quarry for relations in the abstract. She had her lips and her eyes and various other things. They were at their tireless best now. Why let them go to waste? Why let time gather in an unused credit? Satin saw no reason. She was also convinced that her creator never had any reason in mind.

As Mr. Owen studied the girl, he felt as if he were wandering through the fragrance of an old lost orchard in search of the shadow of his youth still lurking among the trees. He could appreciate keenly what the years of soured domesticity had done to him by the very freshness and harking back of his present vision. Old scenes, old songs, and lost impressions came welling up from some long neglected depth of his being. At the moment the desire to be loved was more urgent than to give it. He had done enough of that and found it unre-

quited. This had left him somewhat uncertain of himself in the rôle of a lover. He needed to be convinced, and he had a strong, happy conviction that Satin Knightly could be most convincing when once she set her mind on it. He had begun to feel that falling in love was a sort of automatic process that functioned only when one was young. He had doubted up to now the recapturing of those poignant, all enveloping emotions, those sensations that seemed to be tangled up with every reaction to one's surroundings, one's private thoughts and aspirations.

Now he was not so sure. Satin was working strange magic in him. And if it chanced to be black magic, he did not greatly care. He felt all the better for it—all the younger. He wished, however, that she was not in the Pornographic Department. In such surroundings it was difficult to sustain for long the preliminary stages of romance on a decently exalted plane. In the Pornographic Department they began low and ended even lower. He doubted if there were any preliminary stages in Satin's conception of courtship. She seemed to believe that a lavish display of skin constituted the normal wooing. Should it prove too difficult to guide the young lady's conduct into the channels of conventional decency, he would be forced to

conform to hers, which, when all was said and done, amounted to the same thing. As for his partners, they were simply animals. He liked them, but could find no good in them. They were animals, simple and impure, and would always remain animals. He pitied them a little in the generosity of his newly born emotions.

In the meantime the animals were enjoying themselves according to their fashion. The senior partner had collected the ashes of W. C.'s beard into a neat pile which he now scraped into an envelope and politely offered to their rightful owner.

"Wouldn't you like to keep these?" he asked in his suavest tones. "They're the ashes of your beard—about a foot's worth in all."

"Take 'em," Mr. Dinner urged. "You're about one tenth cremated already, you know."

"Sure thing," contributed the Major. "He should send them to the family vault as a sort of first shipment. The rest of him can come along later, either whole or part by part."

"I want to be an urn when I die," declared Mr. Dinner. "Can I be an urn?"

"No," replied Mr. Larkin. "You'd go much better as a flask or a cocktail shaker."

"Let the Major be a cocktail shaker," the little fellow pleaded. "I want to be an urn, a nice urn in a niche."

"You won't make enough ashes to use up a thimble," Major Barney remarked.

"All right," declared Dinner. "I don't care. Just tuck me in a thimble and stick that in an urn, because that's what I want to be, an urn—" then he added thoughtfully—"in a niche."

"I do wish you'd stop repeating that word over and over again," came the gloomy voice of the advertising man. "I don't know why they ever placed me at this table. The lot of you are no better than idiots."

"You can't be any better than an idiot, can you?" asked the Major. "Unless, of course, you're a maniac, and they're just plain crazy."

"I wonder what he'd like to be?" continued Mr. Dinner, pursuing his mournful topic. "Ask him if he'd like to be an urn along with me. I don't care what company I keep once I'm safe in an urn."

"I don't think W. C. wants to be an urn," put in the senior partner consideringly. "I have a feeling he'd rather go as a gas tank or even a bathtub. Either would be more suitable for a public character."

"Then why not let him go as an ash can or just simply as a kitchen sink?" persisted Mr. Dinner.

"By God!" cried W. C. "I'll not stand for that. No, sir, I won't. You're irreverent, sacrilegious vulgarians. I'll not sit another minute at this table. Let me out of here."

The great man rose unsteadily, stepped on the plate of soup Mr. Larkin had thoughtfully placed on the floor, then staggered away to the speakers' table, where a place was quickly made for him.

"I guess he didn't want the soup anyway," said Mr. Larkin, looking thoughtfully at the mess on the floor. "It was all full of beard."

Mr. Owen shuddered fastidiously. The partners obviously were not at their best at meal times.

"Wonder how soup would go with beard?" wondered the inquiring Mr. Dinner. "I shouldn't think I'd like it."

"Not with that beard in it," agreed the Major.

"I don't think I'd care for soup with any beard in it," vouchsafed the senior partner.

"You haven't seen all the beards in the world," Dinner shot back in a challenging tone of voice.

"I don't care to taste any," Mr. Larkin replied with dignity. "I am not a beard taster."

"Is there such a thing as a beard taster?" asked the Major, who was easily interested.

"I don't see why there shouldn't be," Mr. Larkin replied with more confidence than he felt. "There are coffee tasters and tea tasters and wine tasters. It seems only reasonable there should be beard tasters."

"It may seem reasonable and all to you," Mr. Dinner persisted, "but what I want to know is, what do they want to taste these beards for?"

"They might not want to taste the beards," replied Mr. Larkin. "They might have to taste the beards."

"Why?" asked Mr. Owen, drawn in, in spite of himself. "Why should any man be forced to taste beards?"

"Simply as a means of livelihood," said the senior partner triumphantly. "Necessity—economic necessity."

"You mean as professional beard tasters?" the astonished Major demanded.

"I can't think of anyone being mean enough to beard-taste for pleasure," replied Mr. Larkin. "That would be the same as taking the beard out of honest men's mouths."

"I'm an honest man," Mr. Dinner declared, "and I'd consider it a favor if anyone yanked a beard out of my mouth."

"No self-respecting man would let you taste his beard," replied the senior partner cuttingly.

"Oh, I don't know," retorted Dinner. "I guess I could taste a beard as well as the next."

"But what I don't understand is," deliberated the Major, "what's to be gained by tasting a lot of beards?"

"There you have me," agreed Mr. Larkin. "That's the one weak point in the argument."

"Not at all," cried Mr. Dinner, suddenly switching to the

side of the beard tasters. "A man might want to have his beard tasted for any number of reasons."

"Name me one," demanded the Major.

"Well," replied Dinner, floundering a little, "it is easily possible that a man might like to have his beard tasted to see if it's getting brittle or to see if it's getting tough or to remind him of what he had for the previous meal or to discover lost collar buttons and neckties and other misplaced articles——"

"Men with beards don't have to wear neckties," the Major interrupted.

"Men with short beards do," argued Dinner.

"They can claim they're wearing bow ties," shot back the Major.

"Ah, Dinner," interposed the senior partner. "He has you there. A very good point."

"Of course, if they want to lie about it they can," said Mr. Dinner moodily.

"May I ask," put in Mr. Owen, "what in the world is all this coming to?"

"We don't know," replied the Major, "but don't interrupt."

"I feel I'd be neglecting my duties if I didn't," said Mr. Owen. "You'll go clean off your heads if this keeps up much longer."

"Nonsense," snapped Dinner impatiently. "We often go on for hours like this at the office."

"When there's too much to do," Mr. Larkin explained.

Mr. Dinner's flask, which had been going the rounds during this conversation, was now empty. Accordingly, Mr. Larkin produced his and passed it to Mr. Owen.

"Drink some of that," he said, "and everything will seem much clearer."

Mr. Owen drank and discovered to his delight that Mr. Larkin had spoken the truth.

"I defy Dinner to tell me," resumed the Major, "of one single instance where beard tasting has served a useful end."

Mr. Dinner took a pull at the flask and pondered over this challenge.

"I can conceive of a case," he declared at last, "where an

especially adept beard taster simply by tasting a beard could tell whether it was going to rain or not."

"Brilliant!" exclaimed the senior partner. "Dinner, that was brilliant—oh, very good. Very good indeed."

The Major looked momentarily discomfited. He turned hatefully upon his small antagonist.

"Where would you find such a sensitive beard?" he growled. "One so delicately attuned to nature."

"On a prophet," retorted Dinner without batting an eye. "You know, one of those birds that never shaved."

"You mean a rabbi," snorted the Major. "Who'd want to taste a rabbi's beard?"

"Maybe some especially devout member of his congregation," replied Mr. Dinner. "Who knows?"

"You don't, for one," said the Major. "And I don't care."

"Then," Mr. Larkin suggested smoothly, "it's about time to change the subject. Perhaps we may be able to annoy a few of these damn Kiarians."

Big Boy Crawly, the chairman, was once more on his feet. He was preparing to launch himself forth on a wave of oratory having to do with the character and accomplishments of the speaker of the day, a powerful figure in the automobile world, an entire trade journal in himself, not to mention a couple of house organs.

"Kiarians!" cried Big Boy Crawly. "Need I introduce to you the speaker for today?"

"Not so far as we're concerned," the senior partner consented agreeably, rising to his feet and confronting the room. "And besides, I have a few words to say myself."

"Mr. Larkin," replied Mr. Crawly, the smile flickering on his face, "you are out of order, I fear. The questions and discussions come after the speech."

"Please sit down," said Mr. Larkin in a pained voice. "You know how I am about interruptions. They make me veer most noticeably—fairly spin on my axis. Already I feel like a revolution. I might even do a little foaming on the side. You look as if you were going to do considerable foaming yourself, Big Boy. Do sit down." He paused, then continued rapidly, as if

fearing another interruption. "Kiarians!" he suddenly bellowed in a fair imitation of the great voice of W. C. "No one regrets more than I do that a familiar landmark has today been destroyed before our very eyes."

"Please sit down," cried Mr. Crawly.

"Be still, you," shouted Mr. Larkin, "or I'll cut your smiling heart out. This is sacred. Kiarians!" he unleashed again. "No one regrets more than I do, and in this I include my slightly drunken partners——"

The enthusiastic quacking of a duck greeted this pronouncement.

"No one regrets more than we do," continued the senior partner, "that the magnificent beard of W. C.—the only beard we had among us—should have taken upon itself to catch fire and burn up, virtually in our laps. I would suggest that in future our great advertising play boy, instead of depending entirely on soup, be provided with a neat pocket fire extinguisher of his own, suitably engraved with the Kiarian emblem and some nice little sentiment such as, the Beard that Burns at Banquets Lights the World."

"Oh, for goodness' sake," cried Big Boy Crawly, "Mr. Larkin, won't you please sit down?"

"No, I won't," snapped the senior partner. "I won't sit down. I'll veer round this room like a jolly old whirling dervish. By rights you should be doing what I'm doing for you—saying a few kind words about that poor, dear beard of our excellent W. C. You all seem to have got used to addressing him that way. As for me, I frankly confess I still feel a little embarrassed whenever I have occasion to say it. You know what I mean. However, I'm nearly finished now, anyway. I merely wanted to say it was a good beard, but better soup. The soup was delicious. It was better than the beard because it put the beard out. Anyone can see that."

Dignified Kiarians in various parts of the room were now on their feet. Why had not the Lord God of Business and Boosting struck this man dead as he blasphemed? "Sit down! Sit down!" they hurled at the senior partner as he calmly stood his ground and with a coy, friendly hand waved back to them.

"You Kiarian boys are acting simply childish," he chided them gently. "Do keep still. I want to talk about this beard. For some reason, to talk about this beard fills a fundamental craving in me. I'm frantic about it. Never did I see anything work so perfectly. It was splendid. You know, I'm told that when that beard was quite itself W. C. used to use it to measure the length of advertisements. He'll use it thus no more I fear, unless on very small advertisements. And right here and now I suggest we give a standing vote of thanks to W. C. and his beard for the splendid entertainment they have provided. You will forgive me if I don't join you in this, because I am dying on my feet. I thank you."

The senior partner sat down amid a profound silence, which was rudely broken by the din raised by the members of his party. Mr. Owen and the duck led all the rest.

"You certainly are a pretty talker," Major Barney assured Mr. Larkin heavily. "All those words—all spoken aloud. Think of it."

"This isn't a bad luncheon," Mr. Dinner observed, apropos of nothing. "I find I'm actually enjoying myself. I hope you all realize that I've been doing the duck."

"No!" cried the senior partner delightedly. "Have you been, now? Splendid! Major, you kiss him. You're sodden with drink. No fooling, though, I'm glad you can do a duck. I wish you could do a braying ass for the benefit of our next speaker."

Mr. Crawly was on his feet, but his smile seemed to have slipped, giving him something of the appearance of a saint with a tilted halo.

"Kiarians!" he bawled. "Now that I've been informed that Mr. Larkin was trying to be funny—I mean, to amuse us—I am sure we will all forgive the high spirits of one of the most influential merchants in our city."

"Sure they will," interpolated the cynical Mr. Dinner. "They still owe us for their drawers."

"Knowing that you agree with me in this," the speaker continued, "I will now give you one whose vision, whose courage, whose industry have placed his name among the leaders of our great progressive nation. With such a stout defender of our

time-honored traditions in our midst, the snarling wolf of communism can go and—and——" the speaker paused in search of something sufficiently painful and demeaning for the communistic wolf to do.

"Sit on a tack," suggested the Major.

"Exactly," agreed the speaker lamely, "that's what it can do. Kiarians, I give you that great man of wheels—that automotive giant, Thomas W. Spratter of Sprattsburg, Sprattsylvania!"

The lull was filled with a deafening din as Mr. Spratter arose. It was plain to see that these men were basking in his success and power, that they were hoping to grab off a little of their own simply by being in the same room with him. Later they would refer to him casually as, "My old friend Tom Spratter."

"Why doesn't someone laugh?" Mr. Owen asked most surprisingly. "Now, I think that's funny. That man has a funny name, and he comes from a lot of funny places."

"At last Owen has joined us," observed the senior partner complacently. "He too is a little drunk. Soon he'll become disorderly."

Mr. Spratter, too, was a large, square man, and everything about him was square, save, perhaps, his dealings. He had a square head and a square chin and a square carriage to his shoulders. He stood squarely on his feet and looked his inferiors squarely if arrogantly in the eye. Few persons on seeing him for the first time would have suspected that here was the greatest trafficker in muscle, brains, and souls the world had ever produced, a man who would have sent Attila home in tears to rock the cradle, an almost omnipotent enemy of the spiritual and intellectual life and aspirations of a nation. Even had the observer known all this, it would not have greatly mattered. The man had made good. What more need a man do? And then, of course, he was very rich. That was nice, too.

"Gentlemen," began Mr. Spratter, in a voice like a rough, square brick, "I will not mince matters."

"There," exclaimed Mr. Larkin nervously. "I knew he wouldn't mince. That's bad. That's very, very trying. He

should mince a little, if only for my sake. I don't know how people get through the day without mincing a lot."

"Are there voices in this room?" demanded Mr. Spratter.

"If the speaker is hearing voices already," Mr. Larkin called back with the utmost urbanity, "I fear he will be seeing things soon. Mental cases usually do, you know—angels and what not. Let's stick to burning beards. That's preferable to madness."

If anything, the rugged industrialist settled on his track more firmly. There was a nasty smile on his lips.

"I'll handle this," he said. "If the communist or the socialist or even the single taxist who has just spoken will step up here, I shall take pleasure in knocking him down."

No sooner was this invitation released than the four partners, led by Mr. Larkin, elaborately pulled the tablecloth over their heads and sat crouching beneath it. Frightened cries mingled ironically with the vociferous lament of a duck.

"Gentlemen," continued Mr. Spratter, utterly unperturbed, "my subject is Progress and Prosperity as opposed to Economics and Science."

The burst of approval that greeted this was loud and universal save for the four drunken partners and the duck.

"Gentlemen," resumed Mr. Spratter, "I think at my time of life I have the right to say, I have toiled mightily and wrought in full measure." Mr. Spratter's publicity man had a forgivable yen for the Bible. "Yet in all the years of my struggling and success," the square voice went on, "never once have I lowered the knee to the narrow, unpatriotic dictates of science and economics. Gentlemen, do you know who the greatest scientist is, who the greatest economist is, who the greatest philosopher is?"

In the rhetorical pause that followed, Mr. Owen's timid voice made itself heard.

"Professor Snozzle Durante," he offered.

"What!" thundered the automobile man scornfully. "That murderer! That monster! That socialist! Never! The greatest of them all is Old Man Common Sense. Hear me, everybody! Old Man Common Sense—horse sense, if you like."

"I think of the two," vouchsafed the senior partner, poking his head out from under the tablecloth, "I like horse sense the

better. It's more playful, but I bet you'd have said best, and you'd have been wrong, as usual."

"Yes, sir," went on the great man, ignoring this interruption. "Old Man Common Sense can chop a lot of kindling and make the chips fly."

"There's something infinitely precious to me about dear old homely language," said Mr. Dinner affectedly. "Let's spit and swap horses. We'll make believe the horses."

"I wouldn't take all the Stuart Chases in the world, all the John Deweys, all the Thomas Hunt Morgans," cried Mr. Spratter, "for one grain of common sense."

"Where wouldn't you take them?" the Major wanted to know. "And how do you know those lads would go with you?"

"Shut up!" cried Spratter. "Gentlemen! These men would deny that our great spirit of rugged individualism, our hail fellow, knock-down game of competition, our inherent confidence in the survival of the fittest have produced a race of industrial giants and two-fisted business getters."

"This makes me sick," said a voice that sounded surprisingly like Hector Owen's. "Give me another sip before I kill that butcher in human guise."

"Gentlemen, I say," the great voice boomed on, "rather than knuckle under to the findings of modern science, the advice of malicious economists, and the destructive drive of red-tainted philosophers, rather than do that, let's turn back the hands of the clock! Let's turn 'em back, I say!"

"Oh, good!" cried Mr. Dinner. "That's something to do. Let's all turn back the hands of the clock and keep on turning and turning until they come off."

"No!" protested Mr. Larkin. "Don't let's turn back those hands until after he's finished talking. He's simply trying to trap us into giving him more time."

"If I had those interrupters out at my plant," shouted the speaker, "I'd starve them into submission and——"

"Sell their families into slavery," Mr. Owen helped out.

"Can John Dewey build an automobile?" the speaker wanted to know. "Can Stuart Chase quell a mob of infuriated workers? Can——"

"Can you do card tricks?" demanded Mr. Dinner.

"That's a logical critical method," put in Mr. Larkin. "Let me ask one. Could Abe Lincoln change a tire? No. Very well, then. The man was a washout."

"Silence!" roared the speaker, "or I'll have you jailed for disorderly conduct."

Once more the four partners sat huddled at their table, Dinner quacking pitifully in a subdued voice.

"Men," continued Mr. Spratter, "the Spratters have been fighters from way back."

"Right!" once more Mr. Owen interpolated. "From way back behind the lines."

"During the last war," the great man snarled at his tormentors, "the Spratter poison dart killed more men, women, and children than any other offensive weapon used."

"On which side?" someone wanted to know.

"On both!" retorted Spratter, forgetting himself for the moment.

"Wish I had one now," said Major Barney.

But Mr. Spratter had no intention of letting the discussion be taken out of his hands.

"Kiarians," he broke in, "I am the guest of your loved and respected W. C."

"You should be," said the Major disgustedly.

"And an insult to me," boomed Spratter, "is an insult to him."

"Which is a convenient and time-saving arrangement," commented Mr. Owen who felt himself getting better and better.

"I will not let anyone insult our W. C.!" cried Spratter doggedly. "Therefore I'll ignore these ruffians. And now, men, now, Kiarians, now I come to the burden of my message. Prosperity is with us here and now! She has always been with us! The dear little lady has never left our side. She is waiting for us all both individually and collectively. Her arms are wide open. On her lips there is a smile. Invitation glows in her eyes."

"Wow!" exclaimed the licentious Major. "This is getting good. Wonder what part of her he's going to take up next?"

"Yes, sir," the speaker went on gloatingly. "There she lies, the——"

"He's got her down now," muttered Mr. Dinner in a voice loud enough to be clearly heard, and it must be said for the credit of the Kiarians that a few of them giggled nervously, as they contemplated the recumbent figure of the lady in question.

"Yes, sir," repeated Mr. Spratter with passionate conviction. "There she lies, ready and waiting. All you need to do is to step up and tinker with her engine——"

"What!" cried out the senior partner. "My God, what a thing to suggest!"

"I said tinker with her engine!" Mr. Spratter shouted back.

"I know you did," replied Mr. Larkin, getting control of himself. "That's just the trouble. Don't you realize what a terrible thing you've said?"

"I find the word tinker especially objectionable," put in Mr. Owen with legal distinctness. "I suggest the speaker be requested to moderate his language."

"Sounds fairly brutal to me," observed the Major. "Not a thing to do to a lady."

"Nonsense!" cried Mr. Spratter. "There she lies, I tell you. All you need to do is to——"

"I can't stand looking at her," wailed Mr. Dinner, putting his hands over his eyes. "The poor, poor thing. What is he going to do to her now?"

"I will speak," thundered the automobile man. "All you need to do is to tinker with her engine—a slight adjustment here and there—and then step on her gas. Put your foot down hard."

The last words were said in a voice of grating triumph. Once more the senior partner was on his feet.

"Step on her gas," he repeated in a voice trembling with incredulity. "Am I hearing his words aright? Does he really suggest that?"

"Why not?" demanded the manufacturer. "Why not step on her gas?"

"Why not?" cried Mr. Larkin witheringly. "Are you so

utterly lost to chivalry and common decency as to ask me that?"

"How would you like to have someone step on your gas?" asked Mr. Dinner. "Put their foot down hard, as you said?"

"I don't need to have anyone step on my gas," Mr. Spratter retorted proudly. "I'm always pepped up."

"May I ask," demanded Mr. Larkin coldly, "if myself and my partners are to be debased by such bawdy proceedings? We have stood for having her engine tinkered, but, by God, as a loyal Kiarian, I will not allow anyone to step on her gas—to put his foot down hard."

"Who is this woman, anyway," asked a kindly old gentleman, "to whom all these things are going to be done? I'm afraid I'm a little deaf."

"I've forgotten, myself," called Mr. Larkin, "but it doesn't matter who she is. It's a damned dirty trick."

"The woman is Prosperity!" called Thomas W. Spratter, grimly sticking to his unhappy personifications. "That's who she is."

"I know," persisted the old gentleman, not knowing at all. "But what is she going to be doing about it all this time? Won't she act up and call for help?"

"You don't understand," cried Mr. Spratter. "She isn't a real lady at all."

"She wouldn't be," observed the old fellow, "if she let you do all those things to her."

"Nevertheless, I protest," put in Mr. Larkin. "On behalf of myself and my partners, I protest. Just because a woman isn't a lady, I see no reason why she should be stepped on and tink—— I just can't say it," he broke off. "If the rest of you want to do it," he added, "I can't stop you, but we will have no part in such ungentlemanly conduct."

"All I said was to tinker with her engine and to step on her gas," said Mr. Spratter, feeling rather hopeless about it all. "You'd think I was suggesting a crime."

"Oh, yes," retorted Mr. Owen with fine irony. "To you it may be an every-day occurrence. To you, Mr. Thomas W. Spratter of Sprattsburg, Sprattsylvania, it may come under

the head of pleasure. All this stepping on and tinkering with ladies may be your quaint idea of fun, but, answer me this—what would your wife say? What would any decent woman say? You may get away with it in Sprattsburg, but I dare you to try it out here."

"Gentlemen," called Mr. Spratter, appealing to the room. "My time is greatly limited. This fruitless argument has taken nearly all of it. Soon I must hurry with our excellent W. C."

"I can't stand any more of this," Mr. Dinner complained to Mr. Owen. "I'm going to put an end to it all."

And with this he bent over and struck a match to the nearest portière.

"Sheer genius," murmured the Major, setting fire to the tablecloth. "I'll forgive you, Dinner, for that beard-tasting fiasco."

Mr. Owen, not to be outdone, ignited his napkin and tossed it under the nearest table, where it started to burn merrily among the frantic feet of the Kiarians. Mr. Larkin promptly lost interest in speaking in the face of this fresh diversion. Taking an envelope from his pocket, he lighted it with great care and deliberately held it to another hanging. Then he arose and calmly addressed the assembled Kiarians, who were already uneasily sniffing smoke.

"I'm afraid we'll all have to go," he said. "It seems that some sparks from the late beard of our excellent W. C. have been smoldering in the hangings and things for some time. Emulating his spectacular example, the room has broken out into fire in several places. It's no longer a question of whether Mr. Spratter needs to go or not. He'll damn well have to go. *Sic semper tyrannis!* I am greatly pleased."

It is doubtful if the Kiarians either heard or cared about how much Mr. Larkin was pleased. By this time the room was filled with smoke and flames. It was not so well filled with Kiarians. Mr. Spratter evidently had needed to go because his square figure led all the rest. In their anxiety to depart, the business getters had overlooked the fact that a woman was in their midst. Hector Owen, however, had not been so forgetful.

"I'm going to save Satin!" he shouted, staggering among the tables.

"We'll all save Satin," boomed the voice of the Major.

"My God, yes," cried Mr. Larkin. "She has the most thorough knowledge of indecency of any woman in our Pornographic Department."

Together the four partners laid violent hands on the young lady and, using her as a battering ram, drove their way through the milling Kiarians.

"Don't worry," Mr. Owen told her. "We'll get you out unharmed."

"And also undressed," she responded. "There's little under my skirt, but what there is I'd hate to show in public."

However, she had spoken too late. In their anxiety to do the right thing the four partners were tugging altogether too hard for the resistance of light summer attire. As a result, their burden's garments parted in various quarters so that when the partners passed through the lobby of the hotel they gave the appearance of four gentlemen diligently engaged in carrying away a naked but unprotesting woman. Once on the street they set her on her feet and started to brush her off here and there, as men will.

"Heavens!" exclaimed the senior partner. "What happened to her clothes? She didn't come like this, I hope."

"You have part of my skirt in your hand," Satin casually observed. "The others have other things."

"Put them on, my dear child, at once," continued Mr. Larkin. "It's a sight to make one veer. Besides, this is no place for frivolity. The hotel is on fire. We can't drop back in there. A taxicab would do nicely at this moment."

The Major stopped a cab, and the partners piled in behind the thinly disguised Satin.

"We'll all be late at the store," lamented the senior partner. "It always happens this way. Something inevitably breaks out and this time it was a fire. I like a good fire. We'll be able to watch it from the roof."

As the taxi turned a corner it nearly ran into a fire engine. There were much cursing and shouting and clatter.

"I'd love to be a fireman," Mr. Dinner observed wistfully.

"So would I," agreed the senior partner. "The engines seem to veer nearly as much as I do."

There was a smothered scream from Satin.

"Why, Mr. Owen," she said. "I'm more surprised than insulted."

Chapter X. From the Roof Top

"HORRID!" CALLED MR. LARKIN THE MOMENT THE PARTNERS and Satin had reached his private office. "Horrid! Take Blue Mould up to the roof, but don't let him fall off. He'd splash all over one or more of our customers. If they were going out it wouldn't matter much. If they were coming in it would make a lot of difference. Is everything clear, or have I failed at some point?"

"Don't know about that," said Horrid. "What do you want us to do on the roof, old Blue Mould and me?"

"Look for a fire, of course," Mr. Larkin explained with a show of impatience. "Naturally. What does one go to roofs for? Where's your native sagacity?"

"Me native what?" asked the horrid office boy.

"It doesn't matter," explained Mr. Larkin hastily. "You haven't any. Will someone please throw something over that nude girl? Bare flesh burns me up. If it's a good fire, let me know. If not, I don't care to hear a word about it. If she sold books the way she is in the Pornographic Department we might be able to make two ends meet. What a luncheon! Well, gentlemen, to your places. We must make up for lost time. Dinner, wherever your place is, have someone bring you a chair. You'll look better off your feet. Breathe into space, if at all." The senior partner paused for breath in the midst of this executive outburst and surveyed Honor Knightly. "Splendid legs!" he said, as if to himself. "Oh, legs, legs, legs, what would we do without them?"

"Drag ourselves along," replied the Major laconically.

"Or walk on our hands," added the senior partner. "But I really wasn't asking for information. I was merely exclaiming, rather ecstatically, I thought. Do something about her legs. She owes us her life, and we owe her a dress. Someone figure that out. It doesn't seem right. Have we made up any lost time yet?"

"All," asserted Mr. Dinner. "Or nearly. May I have a slight pick-me-up? The stuff is dying on me."

"You should die with it," exclaimed Mr. Larkin. "Give him a great drink, Major. It may paralyze him. Give us all a drink —even those legs."

"Those legs would like a drink," said their fair owner. "What with smoke and Kiarians and nudity, my mind is all agog."

"I'm very much agog, too," asserted the senior partner. "It's a good word. Two g's in it like boggle, only in different places. Put something on."

The Major passed the drinks around, and everybody sat down to enjoy them, Satin draped in a Spanish shawl snatched from one of the divans.

"Of course," observed Mr. Larkin, frowning worriedly into his glass, "I hope you all realize that this is rather a poor way of making up for lost time. If anything, it's a better way to

lose a lot more of it. I would be a great deal better off without any partners at all. Then I would have more money to spend and very much less lost time. Do I hear any resignations?"

"Horace," the Major assured him affectionately, "you'd be lost yourself without us."

"Would I, do you think?" Horace inquired rather anxiously. "Well, don't leave me, then—not for a moment—although, damn me, I sometimes wonder if we are running this store quite right. It's such a very big store, I should think there ought to be a great deal more bustling about and rushing places, more orders issued, and all that. It would be nice, too, if one of us knew something about figures. Our books are far more mysterious to us all than a set of detective novels. I fear our accountants cheat us terribly. You see how it is. I have to think of these things occasionally, but not, thank God, very often."

"Mr. Larkin," Satin asked him, "may I have Mr. Owen?"

"What an extraordinary request, my child," Mr. Larkin answered. "What do you want him for?"

Satin, holding the shawl tightly about her, hipped herself across the room and, bending over the senior partner, whispered into his ear a few moments. Mr. Owen did not greatly care for this sort of thing. He looked about him uncomfortably.

"Oh!" exclaimed the senior partner at last. "For that! I might have known." He paused and glanced consideringly at Mr. Owen. "Of course," he continued, "the dew is no longer on the rose—the first blush is gone, but a slightly faded man is preferable to a fickle one. How is your health, Mr. Owen?"

"You talk of me as if I were a horse," Hector Owen protested.

"Oh, no," replied Mr. Larkin. "If you were a horse we'd talk about you in an entirely different way. We might even go so far as to examine you. People do, you know. The horses never mind. They have no shame. I admire and envy horses. They have four legs. Miss Knightly doesn't want a horse. She'd rather have you. I don't know why."

"I have my suspicions," said Mr. Dinner. "Want me to air them?"

"No," cried the senior partner hastily. "Fumigate them instead. It happens you're right. She does—and for that."

"Not a bad break," observed the Major, looking the girl over from head to toe. "Not a bad break at all. Think you feel up to it, Owen?"

"For God's sake!" exclaimed Hector Owen. "Why consult me? Wouldn't it be better to drag my clothes off and auction me on the block?"

"It might be at that," Mr. Larkin declared. "Wonder how much you'd knock down for? The women in this town are simply mad about new faces and all. You know what I mean?"

"I fear I do," said Mr. Owen. "Let's change the subject."

"And you must not forget," went on the senior partner, "you own Madame Gloria for life. That's a lot of woman to own."

Upon the reception of this information Satin swung about and furiously confronted Mr. Owen.

"Has he had relations with that trull?" she demanded.

"Only such as are possible at a sidewalk café," Mr. Larkin explained rather nervously. "They were in the presence of the public all the time. There weren't any beds about or anything like that."

"Was there an undercurrent of beds?" the girl wanted to know.

"Merely a slight strain," said Mr. Larkin. "You know how Madame Gloria is—one never gets very far away from a bed with her. I'm surprised at times she doesn't go about in one."

"I know how she is," Satin pronounced coldly. "And I know how she will be if she tries to drag a bed between me and him."

"If it were exactly in the middle," Mr. Larkin remarked thoughtfully, "you might both race for it. He'd be in the bed."

"Do you think I'd stay in the bed?" Mr. Owen demanded.

"I don't see why not," said Mr. Larkin, "if it were a comfortable bed. You'd be sure to have one of them."

"You might even get both," put in the Major. "It might be a dead heat."

"I could beat that old trollop to bed," cried Satin, "with a suit of armor on. But there's not going to be any race. That man, such as he is, is all mine, and may God pity both him and that Gloria wench if I ever catch them together."

"Haven't I any voice in the matter?" Mr. Owen asked. "No *locus standi?*"

"I don't know what your *locus standi* is," she retorted, "but it doesn't sound very decent to me. I've practically reared you in pornography, and I certainly don't intend to let another woman reap the benefit of my teaching."

"Has he picked up much dirt?" Mr. Larkin asked with interest.

"Not as much as he's going to," the girl replied. "The trouble with him is, he hasn't the right kind of mind."

At this moment Horrid stuck his head in at the door.

"There's a lot of smoke," he said.

"Then there should be some fire," commented the senior partner. "Or maybe it's the other way round. Let's go up and see."

"I want a new dress," declared Satin.

"You need a new dress," agreed Mr. Larkin. "Have we any decent dresses in this store? If not, send out to some other shop and charge the stuff to us. I'll send Mr. Owen down to the Pornographic Department as soon as we've had a good look at this fire."

"If he doesn't come down," said Satin, "I'll come up and drag him down."

For a few moments after the partners had left, the girl wandered restlessly about the room, picking up this object and that, examining it curiously before casting it aside in favor of another. She went to the table and poured herself a fresh drink.

Meanwhile, the partners were comfortably seated on the roof of the store, looking at a lot of smoke. There was little else to look at. From time to time the ancient Green Mould, who Mr. Larkin suspected but was not sure should be called

Blue Mould, filled their wineglasses from a bottle selected from several others set in a large tub of ice. The partners did themselves well.

"It's a nice idea to sit on the roof of one's store," observed the senior partner gently, "and contemplate fires while quaffing champagne. There should be more fires."

"Or at least some fire," put in Mr. Dinner in a small, complaining voice.

"If the three of you sent down to the Musical Department," remarked Mr. Owen, "for some fiddles, your happiness might be complete."

"We should have done better than that," complained the Major. "We started four separate and distinct fires in that hotel. Not one of them is making out worth a damn."

"I doubt if an honest fire would burn in such a thick Kiarian atmosphere," Mr. Larkin asserted. "Does Owen want some fiddles? He can have some if he does. I find phonographs much easier. Don't have to use so many fingers and hardly any ear."

Knowing he would miss nothing if he never listened to any of these conversations, Mr. Owen was gazing out over the city. Everywhere he saw broad, tree-shaded thoroughfares linked together by parks and plazas. Through the green of the trees he caught splashes of black, crimson, tan, and orange—vivid bursts of color from the awnings and parasols flanking the graceful streets. Over the hotel they had so informally quitted, a plume of smoke hung in the light, clear air. Smoke still trailed from the windows of the banqueting hall in which high-pressure salesmen had given place to high-pressure hoses. Through the main avenue of the city a body of bright jacketed troops, their accoutrements flashing in the sun, moved rhythmically to the music of a glittering band.

"They never fight, those soldiers," the Major explained regretfully. "Can't get them to fight. All our troops are like that—too fond of clothes. You see, we've changed our mind about fighting here. Decided to give it a miss. Only sworn and accredited pacifists are allowed to join the army. When other nations get mean about things, our standing army of pacifists

can talk them deaf, dumb, and blind before they can even get mobilized. Of course, a lot of sweethearts, wives, and mothers don't like the idea. They can no longer heroically sacrifice their sons, lovers, and husbands for the sake of their country. So many women are such gluttons for death and bloodshed. Frankly, I don't see a thing in it, and I've killed lots of men in my time. It's a thoroughly ill-tempered occupation. In the place of sacrificing their men folk we allow women a little more latitude in betraying them. We don't even call it betraying any more—merely changing their luck. Naturally, we must have soldiers, bands, and uniforms. Such things fill a fundamental craving. I like a parade myself as well as the next."

It was a long speech for the Major, but inasmuch as he was a military man Mr. Owen listened with interest. His eyes were fixed on the hills which, breaking here and there, gave glimpses of the sea. Gazing down on this beautiful city Mr. Owen found it difficult to think of war. Surely here was a place made to order for peace and play.

"Those palaces over there on the hill," said Mr. Larkin, pointing to a magnificent row of buildings in the distance, "are the homes of our retired mayors and political leaders. All built by graft. Graft, you know, my dear Owen, is also a fundamental craving. Self-interest is its brother. We used to attack graft in the old days. Now we encourage it. The only stipulation the voters make is that our grafters must share enough of their spoils with the people, spend enough on public welfare, roads, construction, amusements and holidays to keep us all happy and contented. Thus we have all the fun of being dishonestly yet well governed. Dishonesty is so much more positive than its opposite, don't you think? I love to steal watches. Have you one?"

"No," replied Mr. Owen, "you just took it. I felt you."

"Then you can have it back," declared the senior partner. "There's no fun in it if you know."

Instead of returning Mr. Owen's inexpensive watch, however, he presented him with a handsome new one.

"It's a better watch than yours," Mr. Larkin explained. "Got

it at luncheon from our excellent W. C. You can have it if you don't mind about the initials."

"What happens to your politicians when they fail to share their graft?" asked Mr. Owen, gratefully accepting another man's property.

"What happens?" repeated Mr. Larkin in surprise. "Naturally, we run them out of town. They bore us. We don't find them amusing. You can see that for yourself. Everybody likes to eat, drink, run about with women, and have a good time. As soon as the majority of people find themselves being cramped, we have a bloodless revolution and get bad friends with the government. It's lots of fun."

"And those buildings down there in the valley," broke in Mr. Dinner, his voice embodying the satisfaction he felt, "belong to the prohibitionists and other like vermin who endeavor to thwart nature. They're jails. Very uncomfortable places."

"Do you put all prohibitionists in jail?" asked Mr. Owen.

"Not all," replied Mr. Dinner. "Not the honest ones, but there are not very many of those. These chaps down there are mostly political hypocrites, professional reformers, people with weak stomachs or otherwise mentally or physically incapacitated for enjoyment. There are a lot of anti-vice boys and girls down there. No end of them. People who would rob us of our sex. That's not right. We got to have our sex. A few years back we weren't even allowed to travel with it. Now we can take it anywhere. We found it was making women dumb, keeping them in one place all the time. Now they can see things. And they do."

"I can imagine," said Mr. Owen.

"I'm convinced you can," commented Mr. Dinner.

"How long are these prohibitionists and reformers in for?" asked Mr. Owen.

"Most of them can come out any time they want," was the surprising answer, "but they don't want to. They're ashamed. They get laughed at so much. You see, a person who votes one way, then goes home and acts another is not only a damn fool but also a damn fraud. Such people have no standing in this community. Anti-enjoyment people don't mind jail so much,

anyway. There's something sadistic about jail routine that appeals to their perverted instincts."

"I see," said Mr. Owen. "In your madness there is a grain of sense. May I ask what that great walled enclosure over there is used for?"

"It's seldom if ever used," explained the Major, "but we keep it just the same. It's for the exclusive enjoyment of diplomats and statesmen either foreign or domestic. As a matter of fact, the grounds are open to all patriotic people and munition manufacturers. Whenever they get especially bloodthirsty we invite them to go in there and blow their Goddam heads off. Yet in spite of the fact that we have stocked the place with all sorts of flags and guns and gases—the very things they love so dearly—they seldom if ever can be induced to go in. We have to pitch them in whether they like it or not. Then we take pot shots at them from the walls. After that we bury them upside down and declare a public holiday."

"At the same time," observed Mr. Larkin, "it's good to do a little work, isn't it? We don't seem to be able to get around to doing any. For the last half hour I've been wondering if sitting on this roof can, by any stretch of imagination, be

called attending even loosely to business. I've about come to the conclusion it can't. We've merely gone from one way of not making up for lost time to another. That isn't right. That's very, very bad. People might get the impression we were loafers. Let's go in and look at the store for a change."

"All right," agreed Mr. Dinner. "It's not such a bum shop."

"I like it," declared the Major. "We've ever so many things to sell that nobody wants to buy. There are always enough left overs for all of us."

Tossing their wineglasses to the roof, the four partners rose and departed to look at their store. Green Mould and Horrid gagged down the remains of the wine.

Chapter XI. The Partners Are Helpful

IN THE TOY DEPARTMENT THEY NATURALLY LINGERED A LITTLE —which one of them started the lingering it would be difficult to decide. Probably it was by general consent. It is almost impossible not to linger in a toy department. They lingered long enough in this one for a lady, who seemingly had just remembered something, to accost Mr. Larkin.

"Have you something for a mechanical boy?" she asked, all of a breath.

Mr. Larkin looked puzzled.

"A mechanical boy?" he asked politely as if to give the woman another chance as well as himself.

"Yes," almost panted the woman. "A mechanical boy he is."

"Is he, now," murmured Mr. Larkin. "Too bad—too bad. A mechanical boy. Fancy that. How mechanical is he, madam?"

"Oh, very," replied the woman proudly. "Entirely."

"God spare me," breathed Mr. Larkin. "An entirely mechanical boy. What does he run by, madam, steam?"

"What?" cried the woman. "He doesn't run at all."

"Oh," exclaimed Mr. Larkin, his face lighting up. "I see it. You want this mechanical boy repaired, is that it?"

"It is not," said the woman coldly. "I want a mechanical toy for the boy."

"Does it play with mechanical toys?" asked Mr. Larkin, greatly interested.

"Naturally," replied the woman.

"Must be a remarkable sort of a mechanical boy," observed Mr. Larkin with a sigh. "I'll have to admit that. Will someone else talk with the lady? We're not getting along so well."

"Certainly," volunteered the Major, stepping forward. "Is this a clockwork boy, madam, or an electric one?"

"Both," said the woman promptly. "He's good at both."

"Oh, he is," muttered the Major, slightly taken back. "I never saw one of those."

"You never saw this boy," said the woman. "Never saw the likes of him myself."

"You must be right," admitted the Major, then turning to his senior, added in a low voice, "Shall we go? I'm afraid she'll get angry soon. I don't seem to understand either."

"You great big dummy," said Mr. Dinner, in turn confronting the woman. "Madam," he continued with great assurance, "you just can't have a mechanical boy that works by both clockwork and electricity, and if you have, it should be solv-

ing the fourth dimension instead of playing with toys. In other words, we place little reliance in what you have told us. Please come to the point. Make it snappy."

"All I want to do is to buy a mechanical toy," said the woman in a hopeless voice. "Here I've been talking to three grown men, and I don't seem to be any further along than if I'd been talking to three stuffed owls that had never——"

"Don't let her go on," interrupted Mr. Larkin anxiously. "She'll never stop if she once starts going on. They never do. I know them. The stuffed owls are very bad. God only knows what she'll take up next. Get her mind off us. Ask her how she feels—anything."

"Would you like a broken mechanical toy, madam?" asked Mr. Dinner.

"What would I want with a broken mechanical toy?" demanded the woman.

"We don't know," said Mr. Dinner, stepping back among his larger partners. "If that boy is such a wonder he might like to find out what's wrong with this mechanical toy. No one round here seems to know."

"A good idea," put in Major Barney. "I've been told on reliable authority that it's more fun to get mechanical toys to

work than to watch them do their stuff. Don't you think so, madam?"

"No I don't," retorted the woman. "I think you should have your minds examined—all of you."

"Does she now?" Mr. Larkin murmured thoughtfully. "All of us. That's a lot of minds to have examined. It would take so long to find Dinner's, if ever. And then it would be such a great disappointment when found."

"Don't want it examined," said Mr. Dinner. "If they found anything wrong with it, I'd go crazy wondering what it was."

"You don't have to wonder," replied the Major. "It's merely an alcoholic husk."

Mr. Larkin stopped a salesgirl.

"My dear child," he began gently.

"Don't call me that," she tossed back. "I believed you once when you did, and now I have one of my own."

"Oh, dear," said Mr. Larkin. "How unfortunate. Now I remember your face."

"You should remember much more of me than that," the salesgirl flung back.

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed the senior partner, looking anxiously about. "What a sale this turned out to be! Mechanical toys, at that. Imagine!" He turned back to the girl. "We'll have a nice long talk," he told her, "all about infant mortality. But not now. I must think. This woman wants a mechanical toy, but I fancy she'd be glad to take a stuffed owl in its place. Give her anything she wants or she'll never get home." He now addressed himself to the woman. "This perfectly charming girl will fit in just splendidly with your plans. Her mind is good and her memory altogether too good. Good-night, madam. I hope we'll all feel better tomorrow."

Once more he turned and walked rapidly away. By the time he had reached the end of the Toy Department he was almost running. His companions were close behind. A floorwalker looked after them and sniffed the air enviously.

"I hope we make that sale," said the senior partner, leading them down a flight of stairs to the next floor. "To my dying day I'll never be sure in my mind about that mechanical boy—

whether he was or wasn't, you know—not even sure what the woman wanted."

"Simply a mechanical toy," replied Mr. Dinner, in a superior sounding voice. "I would have fixed her up in a minute."

The Major looked at him scornfully.

"She was preparing to tear you limb from limb," he said.

"And I for one wouldn't have lifted a finger," Mr. Larkin asserted impersonally. "Now, look here, Mr. Owen, this is the Fur Department. Women come here for furs, but most of the time men come with them. It's a very important department. Events leading up to the loss of more honor are initiated here than in any other department in the store. It's remarkable the things women will do for fur. As a matter of truth, I've never found out what they won't do for fur, and I've suggested about everything. Yes, yes, indeed. Women are savages for fur. If our present race of women had lived in the prehistoric days there'd be no fur-bearing animals left at all. Give a woman a piece of fur——"

"They're very much like that where I come from," Mr. Owen broke in quickly, as a picture of a fur coat which he had never bought flashed disturbingly through his mind.

"It's the competitive instinct," contributed the Major with a surprising display of philosophy. "What one woman wears the other woman wants until she has it. Then she wants something else. And if the price of the best fur coats were reduced to five dollars you wouldn't be able to drag one on their backs. Yet the fur would be just as good."

"They don't wear them to keep warm," observed Mr. Dinner. "That's one sure thing. If you gave some of 'em a snout they'd look just like animals."

"Men are quite as bad," said the senior partner. "Especially young men who don't have to work for their money. At football games and other mob activities I've seen hundreds of young chaps overtaxing their maturing strength and spoiling their chances in life beneath the weight of strange-looking garments that would give a bear the creeps, assuming they ever crept, which I doubt."

"But women have to have something to give in for," suggested Mr. Dinner.

"Why don't they give in for an orange, as they used to when I was a boy?" demanded the Major.

"There we go," remarked the senior partner with a shrug to Mr. Owen. "Always getting personal. Now these furs all come from the best animals." Here he indicated the Fur Department with an inclusive wave of his eloquent hand. "All animals of the better class. I've often thought that if you could prevail upon elephants to grow hair everything would be much nicer. It fills me with regret to think that every piece of fur here displayed represents another step in the gradual extinction of animals whose only fault is that they have never learned how to shave."

"I wonder," mused Mr. Dinner, "what women would do if men suddenly began growing fur? Think they'd murder us all?"

"No," replied the senior partner quite seriously. "They'd hardly go so far as that, but I do think they'd try to drag us about on their backs with our arms tied around their necks."

"Why couldn't they tuck 'em in—our arms, I mean?" asked Mr. Dinner.

"That would never do," replied Mr. Larkin. "The furs would begin to pick the clothes off their wearers. A pretty sight that would be."

"How are we going to keep our hands warm, then?" persisted the small Dinner.

"Your hands would be covered with fur," the senior partner told him.

"Ugh!" muttered Mr. Dinner. "I wouldn't like that. Great furry hands like a beast's."

"It will probably never happen," interposed Mr. Larkin in a quiet voice. "There's no good building bridges before we've burned them, is there?"

Mr. Dinner and the Major looked uneasily at one another. This sort of question invariably set them puzzling—taxed them, as it were, beyond their capacity.

As they rounded a corner they came upon a scene of domes-

tic discord. The partners stopped, enthralled, their worst instincts delighted. Two couples, the female members of which were exceedingly pretty women, were facing each other in battle array.

"May I ask why you are buying a fur coat for my wife?" one of the men demanded in a deadly cold voice.

"Apparently for the same reason you are buying one for mine," the other man smoothly replied.

"I'm buying a coat for your wife to keep the poor woman warm," replied the other with withering sarcasm.

"I don't have to buy a coat for your wife to keep her that way," retorted the other husband, growing a trifle common.

"Is that so?" was the brilliant rejoinder. "Well, your wife is hot stuff herself—once she gets away from you."

"Yeah?" shot back the other. "Well, your wife told me that to live with you was the same as living with an eating cadaver—a snoring dead man."

"That's funny," laughed the other nastily. "Your wife told me much the same thing. She said if it wasn't for the neighbors she'd have a hearse parked permanently at your door."

"At that," declared the other proudly, "she said it nicer than your wife did."

"Your wife can't say anything any nicer than my wife can!" was the perplexing reply to this.

"I do think," interposed one of the women involved, "that Jane would have shown better taste had she gone to another store. She knows very well that I always deal here."

"So sorry," said the one called Jane in a sweet voice. "I should have remembered meeting you here with still another woman's husband."

"I was selecting a coat for his wife," lied the first woman glibly.

"My mistake," replied Jane. "You wore one just like it all last season."

"We had planned to dress as twins," said the other lady.

"And doubtless were so successful her husband couldn't tell you apart," Jane remarked with a killing smile.

"Are you accusing me of improper conduct?" the other demanded icily.

"Why, no, my dear," said Jane. "Merely complimenting you on a long and successful career."

"Do you know what they're talking about?" one of the husbands asked the other.

"No," replied the man. "I'm getting tired as hell. They always go on like this."

"I'm dying on my feet," admitted the other. "Let's give them the air."

Fearing the loss of two simultaneous sales, Mr. Larkin felt himself called upon to exert a soothing influence. Leading the gentlemen aside he spoke to them in a low voice.

"If you gentlemen will step down to our Refreshment Department," he told them, "I'll send word that the drinks are on the house. In the meantime, I will take care of the ladies. They can charge the coats either to their own husbands or—if they find it more amusing—they can stick to the present arrangement. I'll see that neither of you gets done in the eye."

"What's the Refreshment Department like?" asked one of the men suspiciously.

"Dear me, don't you know?" exclaimed Mr. Larkin. "Why, there's nothing like it in any store in the city. It's a real innovation. It's run especially for gentlemen who are mad enough to go shopping with ladies. You'll love it."

"Why?" asked the other husband.

"I forgot to say," the senior partner apologized. "It's a sort of alcoholic harem with a continuous burlesque show. You won't find a decent woman in the place."

"Then don't tell our wives," said one of the men. "They'd break their necks getting there."

The two men hurried away, and Mr. Larkin turned to the ladies.

"Now that they've gone," he said, smiling dazzlingly upon each, "we can all get together."

"Where?" breathed one of the women so readily that Mr. Larkin put it down as an instinctive response to any agreeable suggestion.

"My office is busy now," he hedged, glancing at his watch, "but any morning in the swimming pool would make a good beginning."

"Are all men bad?" the one called Jane asked coyly.

"Not bad enough for you, I fear," Mr. Larkin answered gallantly. "Now, if you ladies will just step into those curtained enclosures, I'll take your lines for the fur coats. Dinner, you and the Major can have the one named Jane. Owen and myself will handle this beautiful blonde."

For a few minutes strange noises came from behind the enclosures. A series of giggles, small shrieks and startled ejaculations filled the air. Customers of both sexes paused and looked enviously at the curtains. Even the salesgirls, as accustomed as they were to the enthusiastic methods of the partners, did not remain unmoved.

"My God," came the voice of Jane. "The way these men go about it you'd think they were measuring one for a pair of tights instead of a fur coat."

Presently Mr. Owen came staggering from his booth and stood outside mopping his brow with a handkerchief.

"It's too much for me," he admitted to a salesgirl. "I know nothing about measuring."

"Neither do they," said the salesgirl.

"I'm not at all used to this sort of thing," Mr. Owen continued.

"No?" said the girl with interest, favoring him with an insinuating eye. "How'd you like to practise?"

"My God," muttered Mr. Owen, "what a store!"

The senior partner came bustling up to Mr. Owen and the salesgirl. He handed the girl a slip of paper on which some figures had been hastily scrawled.

"Give those women a couple of coats," he said. "Make the price right. It was worth it. These figures might help, but I doubt it. I was veering slightly when I jotted them down. Charge them. And," he added, looking severely at the girl, "that is the way to make sales. Remember—on your toes."

"I think I see what you mean," replied the girl. "Thank you very much."

Gathering his partners about him, Mr. Larkin moved away with dignity and aplomb.

"Let's collect Satin," suggested Mr. Larkin, "and ask her to buy us a drink."

And thus ended Mr. Hector Owen's first working day in his new occupation. Most people are of two minds. Hector Owen was of many. Of one thing, however, he was sure. He did not want to find himself on the other side of that dimly but hauntingly remembered door—waiting there in the rain.

Chapter XII. Satin Slings an Eel

MANY LITTLE DIFFICULTIES NEVER GET THEMSELVES QUITE ironed out. Gangsters, judges, and other disturbing elements have long been aware of this. But women are even more so. As a matter of fact, women seem to glory in it. And of all things in the world, a great many of their little difficulties have to do with men, actually with men who are notoriously not worth the snap of one's fingers, especially a woman's fingers.

Nor do women need to be particularly interested in the

same man to precipitate a deluge of these little difficulties—to arouse emotions of jealousy. Far from it. Both of them may heartily detest the poor beast, as they have no hesitancy in telling him the first moment they get him alone. The more women fight over a man, the more that doomed wretch eventually suffers. He pays for all their trouble. He suffers if they do and he suffers if they don't. For him there is no escape. If women don't fight over him, his market value declines. His wife grows restless—she becomes cold and unduly critical. On the other hand, many an odd fish with nothing in God's world to recommend him save his trousers has found himself the center of the most alarming competition, merely because one woman has conceived the idea that another woman wants him.

For this reason it is barely possible that jealousy between women is not such a personal manifestation as is commonly supposed. With men it is entirely different, entirely personal—too personal, if anything. Men know exactly what they want, and although their motives are generally of the lowest, they usually know what they are getting at. With women, jealousy has more of the professional quality. It is the jealousy of the artist. It springs not so much from a woman's love of a definitely selected male as from the disinclination to see one of her

sex get away with anything, no matter how undesirable it may be. In other words, women have a proprietary interest in the entire class of males, whereas men, in their casual and shiftless manner, follow the female of the least resistance.

It so happened that Mr. Hector Owen, seated with Satin Knightly and his three partners at a table in a smart sidewalk café, found himself the unwilling center of one of these distressing conflicts. He was not greatly amused. Few men are, to hear themselves boldly discussed as if they were not present. Nor was he, as are so many of his sex, conceited enough to take any credit for the unbecoming conduct of the ladies.

Madame Gloria played a prominent part in this action. She made her entrance while Honor Knightly, pornographic expert, was buying the four partners a drink and, in turn, was being bought drinks by them. There had been lots of drinks already. There were prospects of lots more. Madame Gloria, accompanied by several ladies and gentlemen of her profession, wearily seated herself at the next table. This was unfortunate, for the moment Satin's madly bright eyes rested on Madame Gloria and noted that she was good, they began to snap and sparkle dangerously—venomously. The fact that Madame Gloria was a truly beautiful woman, although perhaps a shade faded, did not soften the quality of Satin's hostile gaze. She had, however, the grace to allow her enemy to seat herself before opening the attack.

"I understand," began Honor, her voice unrelieved by the slightest inflection, "that this person owns you for life. What about it?"

Satin indicated this person by leaning so heavily against him that Mr. Owen found it wiser to cling to his chair rather than to be pushed off it to the floor. In a small flurry of panic the senior partner, whose experience in the past with women gave him small hope of the immediate future, fluttered his hands nervously and rolled his eyes to heaven.

"Here," he predicted in a low voice, "is where we all begin to veer like a series of cock-eyed gyroscopes."

Madame Gloria observed Satin with one of her most perfectly refrigerated smiles.

"Are you personally interested in the answer, my dear?" she inquired.

"I am," said Satin distinctly. "And that lets you out. This man is mine. Understand that—all of you. He's mine. Of course, I don't want him much, but just the same, I'm going to have him. One encounters new faces so rarely."

"Very well, my child," Mr. Larkin proposed in a fearfully soothing voice. "Excellent, excellent, my dear girl. You take his face, and Madame Gloria can have what's left of him, although I very much fear that with her much won't be left of him long."

"Come! Come!" muttered Mr. Owen ineffectually, then added, by way of emphasis, "I say now—come, come!"

"No," replied Honor firmly, utterly disregarding the weak objection of the gentleman under discussion. "I'll have little use for his face unless I find it necessary to slap it occasionally. I want all."

"Couldn't some mutually satisfactory division of the man be arranged?" interposed Major Barney, pursuing the senior partner's difficult anatomical compromise.

Once more Mr. Owen was moved to objections as he gulped down a strong drink.

"Why not draw and quarter me?" he suggested. "Or put me on the spot? From the way things are going, I might as well be hanging in cold storage. Am I some butcher's chunk to be sliced and hacked at the convenience of two women?"

"You'd be better off if you were," Mr. Dinner uttered gloomily. "They're going to do you no good, those two trulls."

"I find this conversation jarring on my artistic sensibilities," put in Madame Gloria languidly. "Why drag it out here of all places?"

"Why drag it out at all?" demanded Mr. Owen in a shocked whisper.

"Now that we've started," replied Mr. Larkin sadly, "it has to be dragged out."

"What has?" mumbled Mr. Owen.

"It!" cried Madame Gloria dramatically. "Everything! We must know all, see all, and hear all."

"Not about me, you don't," exclaimed Mr. Owen, rising from the table. "I'm leaving now. Oh, yes, I am. I'm going right away."

"Sit down!" Satin snapped at him. "And don't mind that woman. I'll drag it out as much as I want. This——"

"Do you think I'm worrying about which one is going to do the dragging?" furiously interrupted the indignant man.

"Will you please be still?" the girl demanded. "This matter must be settled here and now. Drag it out, say I!"

"How do you mean?" asked Mr. Owen, now thoroughly aroused. "Who are you talking to anyway?"

"My good woman," explained Madame Gloria with softly malicious patience, "it has been settled already, this little affair. Can't you get it through your silly head that I am his for life and he is mine?"

"What fractional life interest can he possibly have in you?" Miss Knightly wanted to know. "You're an over-subscribed issue already. For years you've been floating yourself all over town."

"Really," protested Madame Gloria. "This is too insulting. When I give myself to a man I give myself entirely. Everybody knows that."

"Everybody should," Satin tossed back with a smile. "That is, every able-bodied member of the male population, not to mention a few cripples. When you give yourself, lady, you give yourself like a ton of bricks, you horrid old hooker!"

"Oh!" gasped Madame Gloria, not a little offended. "Is that so?"

"Yes, it's so," Satin informed her. "And here's something else: If he's yours for life, he's not going to live very long."

"I don't care how long he lives," Madame Gloria replied most convincingly. "I wouldn't mind killing him myself the way he sits there without a word to say in defense of the woman he owns."

"But, my dear lady," protested Mr. Owen, "you gave yourself to me of your own free will."

"That's a rotten thing to say," cried Madame Gloria, appealing tragically to the members of her party. "You were with

me, all of you. Tell them it's a lie. He had no chance—no opportunity. Out here on the sidewalk—think of it! The man's quite mad."

"Why get so technical, Gloria?" asked a gentleman at her table who was obviously all for peace. "Frankly, I can't see what either of you two women want with him at all."

"I don't either," replied the lady of the stage, "but that doesn't matter. It's not as if I belonged to myself. I don't. I belong now to my public. I have that to think about, and my career, my reputation. Would it look well to see in the papers, 'Gloria Loses Her Man'? Wouldn't that burn you up? Why, I've never lost a man to any woman."

"I wouldn't mind it so much," the gentleman replied, "not when you consider the man."

"I know," went on the actress. "He's admittedly a flop and all that, but I don't want my public to get the impression that the first overripe tomato that comes along can drop in the lap of one of my interests."

"I'll be damned well damned if I'll stand for all this!" Mr. Owen exploded, gulping down another drink. "That man has insulted me twice."

"Insulted you, hell!" exclaimed Satin. "That bedridden trollop of an actress called me a tomato—an overripe one, at that. If it wasn't her stock in trade I'd tear her clothes off!"

"Are you afraid, my dear," asked the bedridden trollop sweetly, "that my figure would put yours to shame?"

Satin rose furiously and began to unhook her dress while the three partners beat desperately at her hands.

"Come on!" she cried to Madame Gloria. "I'll make your body look like a mal-conditioned cow's!"

"Why, if I did such a thing in public," scoffed the lady, "men would hang diamonds round my neck."

At this tense moment a waiter, having proudly exhibited a moribund and loathsome eel to some strong stomached patron, passed by Satin on his way to the kitchen. Mastering her instinctive repulsion in the magnitude of her rage, she seized the snake-like object by its tail, twirled it expertly above her

head, then gave it with a lashing motion to the actress, horror-riven in her chair.

"How do you like that round your neck?" Satin asked her, sitting down and fastidiously dipping her fingers in a fresh highball, then gulping it down considerably less fastidiously.

An eel is not so much a matter of character as it is of feeling. This is especially true of an eel wound round one's neck. One may have no character at all to speak of and yet object strongly to having an eel like that. Although Madame Gloria's character was far from good, she had every justification in assuming that the eel was not going to improve it any. Satin had asked her how she liked the eel round her neck. Madame Gloria was far too busy to give her an individual answer. However, she did make a fairly convincing public protest. Emitting a piercing scream, she clutched with both hands at her neck, only to encounter eel. Immediately she uttered another scream and decided she would rather be strangled to death than risk a similar experience. Thereafter she moved her hands impotently in the air and from time to time made noises. Mr. Larkin was of little help in this crisis. He was sitting with a napkin pressed delicately to his eyes.

"That was a decidedly offensive thing to do," came his awe-touched voice. "How can people think up such things? Just imagine—an eel round one's neck. What retribution!"

But by this time the eel was no longer round the fair neck of Madame Gloria. The eel was in quite a different quarter of the lady. It had slid down the neck of her dress in the general direction of her stomach, where it was much worse not only for itself but also for Madame Gloria. People who have had eels in both places claim that an eel on the stomach is, if anything, more undesirable than the same eel round the neck.

Such people would have experienced no difficulty in getting Madame Gloria to subscribe to their views. In the past she had electrified many an audience by the abandon of her dancing, especially in and about the present locality of the eel. She now cast aside whatever little restraint she had exerted over her movements and did some really shocking things with her torso. At various tables patrons unacquainted with the cir-

cumstances leading up to the gratuitous demonstration, cheered the gyrating woman on to even more devastating endeavors. For the first time in her life Madame Gloria was deaf to applause. It was not until the cause of her anguish fell with a moist flop at her feet that she desisted from her abdominal revolutions and rushed shrieking down the street in the direction of her automobile. After her trailed her party, leaving Satin and her horrid weapon in full possession of the field.

Madame Gloria had departed, and the first round had gone to Satin, yet deep in the heart of the actress burned an intense desire to rehabilitate herself in the eyes of her audience to which she owed so much. And she swore to herself that at a time no later than that night would she assert her rights to the body and person of one Hector Owen. She would watch for her opportunity.

"Now," said Honor Knightly, looking coldly upon Mr. Owen, "you're mine tooth and nail. Make no mistake about that. If it hadn't been for your cowardly vacillation all this would never have occurred. You've succeeded in making me extremely nervous and jumpy, you and your horrid old eel between you."

"It wasn't my eel in the first place," disclaimed Mr. Owen. "I wouldn't lift a finger for all the eels in the world."

"Oh, no!" shot back Miss Knightly in a nasty voice. "Well, what would you do for this one?"

With a vicious lunge she recaptured the fallen eel. Once more the air whistled as the flashing body became the radius of a circle. Patrons at near-by tables buried their heads in their arms and waited for the inevitable crack. Fortunately for her intended victim, but not so for an unknown drunkard, the eel escaped her clutches and landed without warning in his soup. Drunk as he was, the man had enough sense left to know that he had not ordered eel with soup on it or soup with eel in it or eel in any other form. Therefore, putting the worst interpretation on this sudden appearance of reptilian life in the first thing he had attempted to eat for days, he broke into a cold sweat and collapsed to the sidewalk, where he lay calling on God until dragged off by the waiters. Henri, the head deity

of the café, approached Mr. Larkin's table and deferentially registered a mild objection.

"Is it," he said, more in the nature of a suggestion than a request, "that the eel, you could let him rest tranquil for a small little? To our patrons he is more than enough already."

"Count me among the strongest objectors, Henri," Mr. Larkin replied with feeling. "I think it's simply disgusting myself."

"What's so wrong with a little eel?" asked Major Barney.

"I can't begin to tell you," Mr. Larkin replied. "As Henri says, he is simply more than enough. Please, Henri, hurry back with at least two quarts of champagne. And keep all eels away from this young lady. It's not her fault. It's a weakness—like a red flag to a banker, or is it a bull? I'm forever getting them mixed—bulls and bankers, you know. Not red flags. Anyway, what does it matter? And Henri, for God's sake, draw a sheet over the body of that eel, either dead or exhausted, on the table. He is doing no one any good where he is. He is an eel the most depressing, is he not, my old?"

My old, with a dazzling smile, showed the stuff that was in him by departing with the eel mercifully swathed in a tablecloth. Mr. Larkin breathed a sigh of relief and beamed upon his companions. "What a lot of things life is full of," he observed, "and what a lot of liquor we are."

"And we're going to get even fuller," gloated Satin, "and then I'm going for him in a big way."

Once more Mr. Owen braced himself against the pressure of her body. The situation was growing serious. By the time they had completed the ruin of the first bottle of wine he had formulated a plan of action.

"You'll have to excuse me a moment," he said, rising from the table.

"Why?" demanded Honor.

"Is that necessary?" he asked, elevating his eyebrows.

Mr. Owen had been absent less than five minutes when she sprang to her feet and seized a passing waiter.

"Where's the gentlemen's room?" she demanded.

"You're a lady," the waiter informed her. "It's another room, madam."

"At this moment I'm not a lady," she told him. "And what is good enough for a gentleman is good enough for me."

"I know, madam," said the waiter, who evidently had ideas of his own on the subject. "It's maybe all right for you, but what about the gentlemen? Are they to enjoy no privacy at all?"

"If a man's a gentleman," declared Honor, "he shouldn't want to enjoy privacy with a good-looking girl about. Anyway, I don't want to annoy your blessed gentlemen. I merely want to stand outside."

"Very good, madam," said the waiter, "but I don't see what that's going to get you. All the way back to the right."

Satin hurried away and took up her position by the door where she stood her ground in spite of the curious glances of various gentlemen passing in and out. After she had waited what she considered was a reasonable time she sent for Mr. Larkin. That gentleman appeared nervously with his partners.

"You're the most restless woman to take places," he complained. "Never a moment's peace and quiet. If it isn't an eel it's a gentlemen's room. What won't you be wanting next?"

"I want that partner of yours," she grated. "And I want him quick. I don't care what he's doing. You go in there and tell him if he doesn't snap out with a click I'll go in and drag him out."

Mr. Larkin departed on his mission, only to return within a few minutes a much puzzled man.

"He's not there," he said. "He's not in the gentlemen's room."

Satin made a dash for the door, but the partners held her back.

"Think!" cried Mr. Larkin. "Think of what you're doing."

"If I can stand the Pornographic Department," she retorted, "a gentlemen's room should be child's play to me."

"But the gentlemen take it quite seriously, I assure you," protested the senior partner. "And besides, Mr. Owen is not in there."

"Then where is he?" she demanded.

"Gone," said Mr. Dinner.

"To a hotel, perhaps," supplied the Major.

"A stand-up, eh?" muttered Satin. "I'll cook his goose. Let me out of here."

With a sigh of relief Mr. Larkin watched the girl hurry from the café. Then he turned to his partners.

"Let's finish that other bottle of wine," he suggested, "and then go and collect what she has left of our new partner. He's a very foolish man if he entertains the idea he can get the best of one woman, not to mention two."

"That's a funny thing, too," quoth Mr. Dinner. "A woman doesn't mind giving you her best but hates like hell to have you get the best of her."

"Splendid, Dinner!" cried Mr. Larkin, leading the way back to their table. "Write it down in your little book. Even the fact that it's true cannot rob such an utterance of its brilliancy."

A few minutes later another cork popped. The partners, minus Mr. Owen, were industriously at it again.

Chapter XIII. Mr. Owen's Buff

MR. OWEN DID NOT KNOW THE FIRST THING ABOUT THIS CITY into which he had so recklessly thrown himself. He was not even sure that he had made good his escape. Had he seen the closed automobile draw up in front of the hotel into which he dodged he would have been somewhat skeptical on the point. And had he seen Madame Gloria, her fair face set in lines of grim determination, emerge from the car and sequester herself in the lobby of the hotel, his skepticism would have increased to the conviction that from the trap he had crawled into bed with the trapper.

A short time after these two seemingly unrelated arrivals the hotel was treated to a third. Satin, with blood in her eyes and champagne almost everywhere else, rushed impetuously through the wide doors, caught sight of Mr. Owen's unassuming back, and ducked behind the nearest convenient chair.

This happened to be occupied by a nervous gentleman whose sole desire in life was to be left alone. Satin was breathing hard. Feeling a draft on the top of his head the gentleman reluctantly put on his hat, a precaution which annoyed him a little owing to the existence of a headache directly beneath it. The draft ceased, but the sound of wind—a small, self-contained and irritatingly spasmodic wind—continued. Satin had been covering considerable ground. Beneath her fine upstanding chest her lungs were carrying on. The gentleman's annoyance increased. He arose and peered over his chair.

"Why are you breathing on me?" he demanded.

"Got to breathe somewhere," the girl explained.

"But not on me," said the gentleman firmly.

"If you put your newspaper over your head," she told him, "you won't feel it."

"I've already put on my hat," he replied with a suggestion of bitterness. "Isn't that enough?"

"Apparently not," said Satin. "Do you want me to explode back here?"

The gentleman considered this possibility dispassionately.

"I wouldn't mind," he told her at last. "Better to get it over once and for all."

"I've finished panting now," she assured him. "Do me a bit of a favor, and I'll send you a dirty book."

"How did you know I like dirty books?" asked the gentleman in some surprise.

"You look it," retorted Satin, not thinking.

"Mean I look dirty?" demanded the man.

"No," explained the girl impatiently. "Just nasty. You know how."

"How dirty is this book?" inquired the gentleman, deciding to let the point rest.

"Have we time to go into all that now?" expostulated Satin. "It's got pictures."

"All right," said the man. "Here's my card. Don't forget the book. What do you want me to do?"

"See that chap at the desk," she told him. "He seems to be having some trouble. Find out what room they give him and let me know."

The gentleman departed in the direction of the desk. Satin turned her back and stood looking out on the street.

Mr. Owen was experiencing no little difficulty with the clerk, a man of apparently the loosest morals and the most astonishing propositions. Had the escaping partner known that he was endeavoring to book accommodations at the city's most modern hotel, one which insisted on providing everything that would make for the comfort and entertainment of its guests, he would, perhaps, not have been so far at sea. As things stood, however, and in his somewhat confused mental condition, he was having a hard time in battling against the hospitable suggestions of the clerk.

"I don't want to talk to you any more," he said at last to this puzzled individual. "You seem able to think of only one thing. Will you please send me someone else—someone with some faint conception of propriety?"

Another clerk smilingly appeared and presented himself to Mr. Owen.

"Anything I can do for you, sir?" he asked in a confidential voice that gave Mr. Owen little hope.

"Yes," he answered wearily. "I want a room and bath."

"Do you want a double room with a single woman, sir?" inquired the clerk smoothly. "Or would you prefer a nice, cozy room with two of them?"

"Two of what?" asked Owen unwisely.

"Two of women," replied the clerk.

"Haven't you any rooms without women?" Mr. Owen asked rather hopelessly.

"None for gentlemen, sir," said the clerk blandly. "It's a depression measure, you know. The hotel provides accommodations for certain members of our indigent female population while they in turn provide companionship for our male guests. We consider it an exceptionally sensible arrangement."

"I don't know how sensible it is," observed Mr. Owen, "but it certainly is good and immoral."

"Not necessarily, you know," replied the clerk. "Some men enjoy being read to, or waited on, or entertained in various other ways. It's merely a matter of individual preference."

"Well," said Mr. Owen, "from what I've been able to learn of this town, people seem to think of only one form of entertainment."

"That holds for every town," the clerk replied philosophically. "You'll always find it so. The only difference between this town and others is that here we make a virtue of what they make a vice."

"A startling conception," admitted Mr. Owen. "Doesn't anyone ever sleep alone?"

"There's no scientific basis in fact that a man should sleep alone," replied the clerk.

"Is there any that he should sleep double?" asked Mr. Owen.

"No," admitted the clerk, "but it seems more natural."

"I didn't come here to argue," said Mr. Owen. "All I want is a room and bath."

"I know," said the clerk, growing a little impatient himself. "And all I want is to get you to commit yourself to some reasonable arrangement. Do you want a single lady and a double room or two of them in one?"

"How about a double woman and a single room?" Mr. Owen

shot back, spitefully giving the clerk a little something to think about.

"A double woman," murmured the clerk, running the pen through his glistening hair. "A double woman, you're wanting. We've never had one of those. Isn't it rather abnormal?"

"No more than a double Scotch and soda," Mr. Owen replied.

"Isn't it?" observed the clerk. "You must come from a rugged country. Wouldn't two single women do as well?"

"I always take my women double," retorted Mr. Owen. "It's the only way."

The clerk regarded him admiringly.

"It's a new one on me," he said at last, "but it does sound dandy. Where do you get these double women? It might be a good thing for us to know."

"We breed them," Mr. Owen replied in a hard voice. "In fact, I've got so used to double women that I don't think I could stand 'em single. I've a couple of singles already knocking about somewhere. I'm trying to give them the gate."

"Well," said the clerk, once more referring the pen to his hair. "The women go with the room, you know. There's no extra charge. Of course, you've got to feed them, and they don't like being left alone." He paused and looked perplexed "I'll tell you what we'll do," he went on. "You let me talk to the women. I'll explain it to them. Trust me to handle them all right. You go on up to your room, and I'll see what can be done about it. Don't worry. And by the way—" here he paused again and leaned confidentially over to Mr. Owen—"when you have a double woman, what do you do with the other one?"

"Chloroform her," said Mr. Owen briefly. "Or put her in a straitjacket."

Without a word, but looking many, the clerk handed a key to room 707 to the waiting page boy, and a few moments later Mr. Owen was elevated by the lift to his room on the seventh floor.

"For you, sir," said the boy, opening a door to a bathroom, then added, laconically, opening a door on the other side of the room, "This bath is for your women."

"There'll be no women," replied Mr. Owen. "What's behind those other two doors?"

"Guests, probably," replied the boy. "They belong to the rooms on either side of this one. They can easily be unlocked, sir, should you desire larger quarters."

"All I want is this room," said Mr. Owen. "Just this room and a bed and a lot of privacy."

"What about the women?" asked the boy.

"I'll ring for them," he was told.

"Sometimes they don't even wait for that," the boy remarked. "If you ask me, this place is a hotel in name only. Never saw such goings on."

Mr. Owen regarded him nervously.

"Bring me a whole, full bottle of Scotch," he said at last. "I'm going to make myself so that I won't know that there's such a thing as a woman within ten miles."

"It's the only way," approved the page boy, departing with his tip. "Sometimes we have to drag our guests out by sheer force, the women take such a fancy to them. It's hard to work with women—they don't follow any rules."

When the boy had gone, Mr. Owen walked to one of the windows and stood looking out over the city. Night had fallen now. Lights in rows and in clusters illuminated the darkness. Rivers of radiance flowed through the streets and boulevards, and occasionally splashed over their boundaries in great bursts of color in the parks and plazas. Faintly on the night air floated the strains of an orchestra embroidering the deep overtones of the city. In the park facing his window men and women were dancing while scarlet-jacketed waiters sped about between the trees with gleaming buckets of wine. A man in a velvet blouse was bending to the voice of his violin, his fingers stinging the strings along its shaft. The bare arms and shoulders of women attracted and tossed back the lights trickling through dark leaves.

Was everybody happy in this city, Mr. Owen wondered, or was this only a superficial glamour such as any city could show? He felt inclined to doubt it. As far as he had been able to discover during the short time he had been there the entire

populace seemed to be much more interested in the way to enjoy life than in how to earn a living. This was how things should be, yet never were. Perhaps the encouragement of political graft and grafters was the solution. In a way it seemed logical. Political grafters usually took care of their friends. If the same benevolent attitude were extended to include the entire population, then everybody would be happy and no bad habits broken. It was a reasonable arrangement, after all, for instead of wasting a lot of time in attacking a system or a moral code as wrong, it took advantage of its wrongness and developed it to the point of perfection.

The boy, entering with the bottle and a bucket of ice, interrupted Mr. Owen's musings. He was tired and needed a drink. He took several and no longer felt tired. Without a blessed responsibility in the world, either moral or financial, and with no fear of the morrow, Mr. Owen sat down and faced the bottle. It was remarkably good whisky, he decided. What was he going to do without a lot of responsibilities to shoulder, payments to meet, obstacles to overcome? How in the world was he ever going to get through the day without a swarm of worries nagging at his mind? Would his character become weak and flaccid? Would he lose his moral standards?

To keep himself from spiritual decay, would he have to start in and endeavor to reform this world? That would be a dreadful thing to do, but no doubt that was how, or rather why, so many reformers were always cropping up to trouble the peace of mankind. They wanted to save themselves rather than to save others. Why couldn't a person be satisfied with his own ideals instead of trying to cram them down other people's throats? God, if there was one, never got a chance. Humanity was formed and reformed and fumigated and eventually embittered before He even had an opportunity to find out what all the fuss was about.

It was not a good way to go on. Mr. Owen was convinced of that. He began to worry about God and humanity. He decided that neither would suffer and that he himself would improve greatly if he had another drink. He filled his glass and rang for the boy.

"I want the largest box of the largest cigars in the house," Mr. Owen told him. "And I want some very large matches."

"Yes, sir," said the boy, apparently not surprised by such an order. "That whisky makes a body feel that way."

Perhaps the boy was right. Mr. Owen did not know. He was feeling better now about both God and humanity. They would pull through somehow. In this town they put reformers in jail, which was a good thing, yet it went to show that the only way to fight intolerance was with intolerance. And just what did that prove? There could be no such animal as complete tolerance until people learned to mind their own business. And when would that be, might he ask? He laughed aloud sarcastically and was startled by the sound of his own voice. Another drink fixed him up. He was glad to see the boy.

"Those certainly are big matches and even bigger cigars," he told the boy. "Where did you get such big matches, boy? They must be all of six inches long."

"Yes," agreed the boy. "They are very big matches, but they're not the biggest matches."

"No?" said Mr. Owen. "Have you ever seen bigger ones?"

"Sure," replied the boy. "Out in the country they make 'em so long a man has to climb a tree to strike one on the seat of his pants."

"Is that so?" replied the astonished Owen, thinking he understood, then suddenly realizing he did not. "How does that help?" he added. "How can he strike a match on the seat of his trousers way up in a tree?"

"He doesn't," replied the boy, "but the man on the ground does."

"Oh," said Mr. Owen, then looked suddenly at the boy. "Will you please go away," he told him. "I hate stories like that. I hate even to think of the inane mind that conceives them. Imagine a man being so damned accommodating as to climb a tree—— No," he broke off, "I don't like to think about it. You'd better go."

The boy left, and Mr. Owen complacently resumed his drinking, a faint smile on his lips. He contemplated the twin beds and tried to decide which one he would choose. That

double woman idea of his had been a good one. It had worked. The clerk had been greatly impressed. He, Mr. Owen, would not be troubled by a lot of loose women.

As he sat there drinking he wondered why he had run away from Satin. He suspected that she had been too bold, too sinister about her intentions. After all, he did really want her. He wanted her more than any woman he had ever known. He could not say why he did unless it was because she gave him a feeling of youth and expectancy. He wondered where she was now and what she was doing. That was too bad, too. The moment a man got interested in a woman he began to wonder where she was and what she was doing instead of just being satisfied when she happened to drop in. Still, if people did not remember each other they would get dressed in the morning, then rush out and forget to come back. Perhaps that would be a good thing, too. No lasting affiliations. Just a good time always.

He pulled his thoughts up with a start. Already his character was slipping. Depravity was setting in. He hoped a complete moral collapse was not far off. One could not arbitrarily dispose of one's inhibitions. They had to be drugged first, then knocked over the head. Still smiling faintly, he rose and ambled, glass in hand, to the bathroom. The tub looked inviting. A man could almost swim in it—a man and a woman. Once more he wondered where Satin was. Then he wondered why it was that a lovely bathroom with lots of mirrors and gadgets in it always evoked indecorous, if not indecent, thoughts.

Perhaps the human mind was so constituted that it involuntarily rebelled against the idea of absolute cleanliness. Lots of people—nice ladies and gentlemen—must look at lovely bathrooms and think bad thoughts. A woman looking at this luxurious bathroom, for instance, just could not help seeing herself in it, and as it was a well known fact that a woman cannot enjoy seeing herself alone, she would naturally have someone else along with her, and, he supposed, that was not a very nice thing, or, at least, lots of people said so. He himself had better stop wondering about so many stupid things and

turn on a few of those gleaming faucets before going to bed.

What a day it had been! Now that he came to think of it, the day had almost been a life—an entire life behind which his brain refused to penetrate. There had been other things once, but at the first suggestion of them his thoughts turned and wheeled about like a drove of frightened horses. A bath would be refreshing. It might improve his character; then again, it might not. Anyway, good people bathed occasionally as well as bad. Who was he to snap his fingers at a bath? He was glad there was no eel in it. Where was that girl now that he was all ready to take a bath? He would take a bath without her. He always had in the past. Why not now? He turned on his heel and began to undress in the casual fashion of the brooding male.

What with one thing and another, Mr. Owen became so preoccupied with his undressing that for the moment he lost that awareness of his surroundings which all males, either brooding or otherwise, should exercise when performing such a delicate operation. So deeply engrossed was he in some knotty moral problem that he failed to hear the stealthy opening of the door to one of the guests' rooms.

Nor did he see the red head of a woman thrust itself through the aperture while two bright eyes studied his sparsely clad figure with frank but unladylike interest. He did see, however, just at the critical moment when he was about to attack the business of doing away with his drawers, the other door fly open and Madame Gloria, in almost as bad a fix as he was, standing resplendently in it.

"I see it all now!" cried the lady in a voice choked with emotion. "Everything is clear."

Hearing the dazzling creature for once speaking the truth, Mr. Owen became convulsed.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "What a fix! I can't stand looking even at myself, and I certainly shouldn't look at you."

"Gaze over your right shoulder," Madame Gloria commanded, "and you will see something else again—something that will cause you to swoon in your tracks."

"I need little help in that direction," he muttered, glancing

over his shoulder, and at that moment the room leaped into darkness.

In this comforting concealment Mr. Owen stood, undecided as to his next move. As he listened to the strains of the orchestra drifting in from the park, he wondered how God could permit people to dance and enjoy themselves while his plight received no attention.

"Quick!" came the penetrating whisper of Madame Gloria. "Leap into my room. We can carry on there."

"A nice lady," observed Mr. Owen aloud to himself in the darkness. "If that woman doesn't go away they'll have to carry me out on a stretcher."

Whether he thought it was more impersonal or more forceful to address his remarks to Madame Gloria indirectly, Mr. Owen was not sure himself. For some strange reason it gave him the feeling of being less physically involved in the situation.

"I am still here," called Madame Gloria sweetly.

"I feared as much," said Mr. Owen. "But you shouldn't be. Can't you realize, Madame Gloria, that I am stripped to the buff?"

After this announcement there followed a long, pregnant silence which was finally broken by Madame Gloria's voice.

"Listen," she said with a trace of humility. "I've been acting all my life and I've missed a lot of words. What's your buff?"

Mr. Owen thought about this for a moment, and while doing so became convinced that he heard someone giggling softly in the room. Was this implacable woman advancing noiselessly upon him to make her kill?

"You should know that as well as I do," he exclaimed impatiently.

"Should I?" she asked. "Have I one—a buff?"

"How should I know, madam," he asked wearily, "whether you have a buff or not? I suppose you have, but is this any time to enter into an academic discussion of buffs? Maybe it's a state of being and not a thing at all."

"It would be better so," said Madame Gloria dryly. "Whenever I'm like this my audiences are in a state of frenzy."

"So am I," retorted Mr. Owen. "But you don't hear me clapping unless it's with my knees. Don't creep up on me and spring without warning."

"You looked cute with your buff," came the musing voice of Gloria.

"In my buff, madame," Mr. Owen corrected her. "It's not with. I'm sure of that."

"But you didn't seem to be in hardly anything at all," the woman protested. "Did you get them off?"

"What off?" asked Mr. Owen.

"Your funny little drawers," replied the lady.

"Why do you want to know?" he demanded nervously.

"Who has a better right?" she asked.

"I don't know," he retorted. "I can't think clearly. I don't even know if anybody has any right to know anything about my drawers."

"That's a pitiful condition to be in," she observed sympathetically, "but cheer up. I won't leave you long in doubt."

This threat—or promise—left its hearer so unnerved that he was seized with a desire to drink. The inhibitions he had thought he was losing had flocked back to him from the past. A bathrobe would have saved his end of the situation. There was none. In the darkness he could not even find his trousers. As he reached out to grasp the bottle a shriek broke from his lips as his hand felt a bare arm. His fingers slid down it only to encounter a firm hand clutched round the object he was seeking. This time his shriek embodied a note of bitter disappointment. He had needed that drink and he still did. Was he surrounded by naked women? Was the darkness cluttered up with bodies? Abandoning his attempt to possess himself of the bottle he raced for the nearest bed, and jumping in, encountered a body in the flesh. This hotel must be used to shrieks, he thought to himself, emitting another one and reversing the direction of his jump like a diving figure in a playful newsreel. As he crawled towards the other bed the room was filled with sound. There was a scampering about in the darkness and a vigorous banging of doors. Fumbling greedily with the coverings of the second bed, he was about

to crumble beneath them when the gentle voice of Madame Gloria turned him to a graven image.

"I'm here," said Madame Gloria, "if you're looking for me."

"Will you tell me where you aren't?" he chattered. "Only a second ago you were in the other bed."

"Oh, no, I wasn't," came the playful reply. "That was the other one."

"What other one?" he asked in a dazed voice.

"The other woman," the lady explained.

"Holy smokes," faltered the man, reverting to the vernacular of his youth like a person approaching the end. "Are there two of you in this room?"

"At the very least," replied Madame Gloria.

"Two women and one buff," came a voice from the other bed. "Who gets the buff?"

"From the way he's acting," complained Madame Gloria's bed, "a person would get the impression it was a blind man's buff."

"There's none so blind as will not see," observed the other voice, which he recognized now as that of Satin. "This chap won't even feel."

"Are you two going to chat there comfortably in my beds," demanded Mr. Owen, "while I crouch here in the darkness?"

"Why not transfer the scene of your crouching to my bed," inquired Satin, "and then we can all chat together?"

"If you get in bed with that woman," cried Madame Gloria, "I'll damn well drag you out, buff or no buff."

"I heartily hope you do," said Mr. Owen with all sincerity.

"That works both ways, mister," Honor told him.

"You don't have to worry," said Mr. Owen, "neither of you. I'd rather crawl in bed with a couple of bears."

"No animal could be barer than I am," commented Satin thoughtfully. "Not even a billiard ball."

"For shame," reproved Mr. Owen.

"That's right," said Satin. "For shame, it is. What would a girl do if it wasn't for her shame?"

"I thoroughly enjoy mine," put in Madame Gloria. "Quite frankly, I admit it."

"Well, I can't bear mine," declared Mr. Owen. "If you all don't go away, I'm going to lock myself in one of the bathrooms."

"Who's got a match?" asked Satin. "I want to light a cigarette."

"You do yourself well, don't you?" Mr. Owen asked sarcastically. "Cigarettes and everything. I suppose you've got my bottle, too."

"I have," replied Satin. "I sip it from time to time. Crawl in and I'll give you a swig."

"If he does," grated Madame Gloria, "I'll yank him clean out of those funny little drawers."

"You'd be one yank too late," chortled Satin, and even Madame Gloria was forced to laugh softly to herself in the darkness.

"I don't see how you can laugh," Mr. Owen lamented. "Suppose the partners knew where you were, Miss Knightly?"

"They'd all be right in with me," asserted Satin. "Pell-mell and topsy-turvy. They're not sexually illiterate, like you—not those boys."

"Sex! Sex! Sex!" cried Mr. Owen. "Sex morning noon and——"

"What are you shouting about?" interrupted Honor. "You've got plenty of sex around. Aren't the two of us enough?"

"The way that man calls for his sex," put in Madame Gloria, "you'd think he wanted a harem."

"I've met men like that," commented Satin. "Never willing to start at the bottom rung."

"I hate ladders in my stockings, too," observed Madame Gloria, apropos of nothing as far as Mr. Owen could see.

A match suddenly flared in the darkness.

"There he goes!" cried Honor Knightly. "It's hard to say whether it's a man running away in drawers, or a pair of drawers running away with a man."

"Looks like a running man in drawers," replied the other lady as the match went out. "Wonder where he's going?"

"Maybe he's getting ready to spring on us," suggested Honor.

"He'd have to be all spraddled out to land on us both," observed Madame Gloria. "Doubt if he could make it."

They were not long in finding out. Mr. Owen had dashed to the nearest bathroom and was clawing at the door. It flew open in his grasp, and he looked in upon a strange woman splashing busily in the bathtub.

"Come in," she said calmly. "What's your hurry?"

Chapter XIV. The Hour Grows Late

"I'M NOT IN A HURRY," GASPED MR. OWEN, BACKING OUT OF the room. "I'm in a whirl."

"Come back!" called the woman as he sped in the direction of the other bathroom. "I won't look."

This invitation served only to increase Mr. Owen's speed. He reached the door, flung it open, and dashed inside, slamming it behind him. Almost immediately the two ladies in the

beds were treated to a series of animal-like cries such as they had never heard before. Mingled with them were the entreating notes of a woman's voice.

"My God!" cried Honor. "A woman's got him in that one. To the rescue!"

Merging the worst features of their seemingly one and only interest in life, the two women sprang from their beds and raced to the bathroom door.

"Come out of there!" cried Honor.

"What are you doing now?" called the more imaginative Madame Gloria.

"Wrestling with a woman," came from Mr. Owen in grunts, "and she's all wet and naked."

"I'll fix her," grated Satin. "Which way are you wrestling—for or against?"

"Why don't you answer?" cried Madame Gloria nervously. "We can't see a thing. Why is the door locked? We want to know everything."

"Well, you can't be a Graham McNamee in the arms of a naked woman," Mr. Owen panted as caustically as conditions would permit. "Especially a wet one with soap all over her. I can't grab hold."

"Of what?" asked Satin.

"Of anything," called Mr. Owen.

"That's just as well," put in Madame Gloria.

"If you two molls would go away," came the voice of the woman behind the door, "I'd soon have him eating out my hand."

"I'd rather see him starve first," said Madame Gloria in a tragic voice.

"I don't give a damn about his appetite," put in Satin. "I'm worrying about his buff, whatever that may be."

"Yes," agreed Madame Gloria. "He seemed to set a great deal of store by that buff. We have to get him out." She rattled the door furiously. "Why don't you come out?" she cried. "Unlock the door, and we'll drag you out."

"I'm trying to," Mr. Owen called back, "but my hand is trembling so I can't turn the key."

"All right," broke in the disgusted voice of his captor. "All right. Go on out. I don't want a nervous wreck."

In the meantime the lady in the other bathroom, hearing the noise, had emerged drippingly, clad strategically in a towel.

"Where'd he go?" she inquired of the other two. "I caught only a glimpse of him."

At this moment the bathroom door flew open, and she caught another. Mr. Owen found himself between two fires with the light from behind flooding down on the scene. He took one paralyzed look at all the bare flesh by which he was surrounded; then, snatching the towel from the clutches of the first bathing woman, flung it over his head.

"Back to your places!" he screamed. "Back to your beds and baths, or I'll throw you all out on your——"

"On our whats?" demanded Satin.

"On your ears," he retorted. "Make it snappy."

There was a patter of bare feet, then quiet settled down.

"You may come out from under that towel now," Satin's voice proclaimed.

"I'm going to live beneath this towel for the remainder of my life," he answered firmly.

"I think you're about to lose a button," Madame Gloria said comfortably from the pillow. "*The* button, I'd be inclined to suppose."

With great promptitude Mr. Owen snatched the towel from his head and flipped it round his waist.

"You've got four of us now," observed Satin. "What are you going to do with so many?"

"I'll show you," said Mr. Owen, striding over to the telephone. "I'm going to have you all chucked out."

"On our ears?" inquired Honor.

"I don't give a damn what they chuck you out on," he retorted into the transmitter.

"And as for me," came back a voice over the wire, "I don't give a damn if they slit your throat from ear to ear."

"I wasn't talking to you," Mr. Owen hastened to explain to the operator at the other end. "I'm sorry. Please give me the desk."

"Oh, that's all right," the girl's voice replied. "If you've no objection to my sex I'll come up there and help you to chuck them out myself, whoever they may be."

"For God's sake, don't," he cried. "I'm oversexed already. I want the room clerk."

"The room clerk!" exclaimed the girl. "What on earth does a man in your condition want with the room clerk?"

Mr. Owen emitted a howl of rage.

"Calm yourself, dearie," came the voice of the operator. "I'll give you the room clerk, though I must say—— Hold on, here he is."

"Hello!" cried Mr. Owen. "Room clerk? Good! I've got two beds and two baths, and there is a naked woman in each."

"What more do you want?" asked the room clerk. "We haven't any double women, if that's what you're after."

"I'm not," snapped Mr. Owen. "But where do you expect me to go?"

"I don't know about you," said the clerk, "but if I was fixed up as you are, I'd either go to bed or take a bath. You can't lose."

"Something has to be done about all these women," fumed Mr. Owen. "And that without further delay."

"I should say so," agreed the clerk. "The night isn't getting any shorter. By rights you're entitled to only two women. How did you manage to smuggle the others in?"

"I didn't smuggle them in," Mr. Owen protested. "They smuggled themselves in."

"Women are great hands at that," philosophically observed the clerk. "You seem to be having all the luck."

"Listen," Mr. Owen pleaded. "You don't seem to understand. There are two beds and two baths. So far I've got a woman in each."

"Let's see," broke in the clerk. "If I remember your room rightly that leaves three chairs and one sofa unoccupied. Do you want a woman in each of those?"

"Are you mad?" thundered Mr. Owen.

"No," replied the room clerk, "but you must be, not to be satisfied with a couple of beds and bathtubs filled with women."

"I said you didn't understand," wailed Mr. Owen. "I'm more than satisfied. Much more than satisfied."

"Ah!" exclaimed the gratified clerk. "I have been stupid, haven't I? You want to compliment the hotel, don't you? Well, I'm sure the management will be delighted to hear you've had a good time. Go right to it. What a stupid ass I've been."

"You still are," groaned Mr. Owen, and hung up the telephone, a beaten man.

Suddenly he was seized by a mad idea. Springing up from the telephone, he fled across the room in the direction of Madame Gloria's door. Up from the beds and out of the baths like four naked bats out of hell the women raced after him. Across Madame Gloria's room he sped and out into the hall, his pursuers close behind. Here his flight was arrested by the sudden descent of his drawers. Yet even as he fell he had time to thank his God he was landing face forward. When he did land, the women behind him passed over his prostrate body and became hopelessly entangled on the other side. Still in the clutch of inspiration, he sprang to his feet and, pulling up his treacherous drawers with one hand, dashed back to the room he had just quitted and locked the door behind him. Hurrying into his own room, he seized the bottle of whisky and took a deep pull. From the hall came the sounds of agitated female voices. Hands were beating on his door. Mr. Owen grinned and drank again. His telephone bell was ringing. Applying his ear to the receiver he listened blandly.

"Say!" came the voice of the clerk. "The floor operator tells me that there are four naked women beating on your door and raising howling hell in the hall to be let in."

"Good!" cried Mr. Owen. "It's music to my ears. I was expecting them."

"But, man alive," went on the clerk, "you've already got four naked women, and with these four it makes eight altogether. How many more do you want? People sleep in this hotel occasionally, you know."

"No," said Mr. Owen. "I didn't know that. Well, I'm going to be one of them."

He hung up the instrument and turned back with a satisfied smile to the room. Four indignantly naked women were watching him with glittering eyes.

"You forgot the other door, didn't you, dearie?" said Madame Gloria in oversweetened tones.

"And that's going to be just too bad for you," added Satin, her small white teeth gleaming.

Mr. Owen made one dive for the bed. The women made four. All landed safely, Mr. Owen on the bottom. At this moment the partners, escorted by a page boy with a passkey, entered the room with the glacial dignity of the elaborately drunk.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Larkin. "What a bevy! And where can Owen be? Ah! There he is! Underneath the bevy, of all places."

"Is he the one with the drawers?" asked Mr. Dinner.

"Yes," said Mr. Larkin. "The only one with drawers, if my eyes do not deceive me."

"He won't have them on long," Major Barney remarked placidly, "the way they're going for him."

The presence of the gentlemen spread consternation in the ranks of the ladies who, to Mr. Owen's surprise, suddenly developed scruples hitherto unsuspected. In their own strange way these women had their standards. Up to this point each one of them had believed herself to be rightfully entitled to Mr. Owen. In the face of an audience they were willing to abandon their claim. And they abandoned it as energetically as it had previously been pressed. They literally took Mr. Owen up and tossed him at his partners' feet. After that they divided the bedclothing and sat expectantly swathed.

"And now," resumed Mr. Larkin smoothly, this time addressing the highly edified page boy, "if you'll be so good as to hurry away and bring back leagues of sandwiches and oceans of strong drinks, we'll see what can be done to make this evening pleasanter—or is it morning? I forget which. Does it really matter?" As the boy hurried away, he turned to Mr. Owen. "I ask you," he resumed. "Does it? No. All that really matters is that you get some trousers on as speedily as possible. And that only matters to you, although sometimes I feel we are liberal to a fault."

Mr. Owen rose and shook each of his partners by the hand.

"Gentlemen," he said, looking vindictively at the ladies seated like so many Orientals on the beds, "you saved me from a living death."

"I cannot think of a happier one," Mr. Larkin replied, bowing to the four swathed figures. "Who are the other two? I don't seem to recall their faces."

"We go with the room," explained one of them in a husky voice.

"And he didn't want us," said the other, "but we sneaked in anyway, just in case he changed his mind."

"Conscientious to the last," observed Mr. Larkin approvingly. "You seemed even willing to change his mind for him."

"Let bygones be bygones," said Mr. Owen with a grin as he collected his scattered garments and made for the bathroom. In a moment he reappeared and picked up the bottle. "You know," he explained, "this bottle and these drawers and myself have been through so much together we can't bear to be separated."

"You almost were," said Satin grimly. "And if you keep flaunting yourself before us I'll snatch you as naked as a babe in arms."

Mr. Owen departed, this time not to return until securely as well as completely clad. His bottle was now empty, but the room was full of drinks. As usual the partners had done things on a tremendous scale. Everywhere Mr. Owen turned, a glass or bottle was ready to his hand. Nor did it take long for them to find their way to his lips. On the two beds the ladies sat in their drapery and munched sandwiches. In their eyes was that knowing expression of women awaiting developments which experience has taught them were quite inevitable even when unsolicited.

"I've literally thrown away my night," declared Madame Gloria, adding an empty glass to two others already beside her. "Simply tossed it away."

"Why, my dear lady," protested Mr. Larkin. "All is far from lost. Instead of getting one man, you've got the four of us. Think of that."

"Yes," replied Madame Gloria. "I am. Three old faces and one new but stupid one."

"And lots of free drinks," put in the practical Mr. Dinner.

"They make up for a little," assented Madame Gloria, "but not for all—not for the new and stupid face. I'd like to slap it."

"Why can't you cultivate an attitude of indifference towards me?" asked Mr. Owen annoyingly. "My face may be new to you, but really it's an old, old story."

"But, my dear man," explained Madame Gloria. "I haven't seen the last chapter yet."

"No, but you have almost everything else," Satin lazily observed. "All of us have. Weren't his little drawers enough?"

"Those drawers were almost too much," Madame Gloria agreed reminiscently. "Especially when they tripped him."

"Can't you veer this subject, Mr. Larkin?" asked Mr. Owen, feeling that his once secret life had now become a public scandal. "Those drawers of mine are exhausted."

The senior partner daintily shot back an immaculate cuff and examined a magnificent wrist watch.

"It is," he said, "exactly three o'clock in the morning. At this hour people, if they sleep at all, are usually attempting forty winks—that is, if both parties are willing."

"Which is ideal," put in Mr. Dinner.

"It does make for party harmony," agreed Mr. Larkin. "But to continue. The halls of this hotel are infinitely long, and broad almost to a fault. For gentlemen that stagger, as what gentleman doesn't, they are occasionally discouraging. One either falls down or grows sober before hitting them. For a man who veers as much as I do, whether drunk or sober, this becomes quite a trial. It throws the responsibility for my progress on my own shoulders instead of on the walls. I mean, the walls themselves—not their shoulders. Anyway, that's not what I'm talking about."

"No?" inquired Honor Knightly. "Would it upset you greatly to veer round to what you are talking about?"

"Not at all," was the ready response. "Only, my dear lady, don't fly out at me. What I wanted to say was that I would

like to have me a little foot racing done. There! I've said it."

"You have," remarked Major Barney, "but not very clearly. How do you mean, 'I would like to have me a little foot racing done?' It's not even bad English. It's worse. Something seems to be there, but one can't quite find it. Do you mean that you would like to sit in a chair and watch others run foot races for you, or that you desire to participate yourself in some damn fool sporting event, or just what intelligence are you trying to convey through the medium of human speech?"

"I would like to run a foot race on foot," said Mr. Larkin simply, but in a slightly offended voice. "But I'm getting a little exhausted about it even before it's started."

"Well, that's clear, at least," commented Major Barney. "Does anyone else feel like running a foot race on foot?"

"How?" asked Mr. Owen, who had secretly won tremendous races in the past.

"On foot," replied Major Barney.

"Oh," said Mr. Owen. "If it's on foot, I'll run one."

"On what foot?" asked Mr. Dinner, blinking.

"On one's best foot," supplied Mr. Larkin. "One puts it forward, you know."

"And drags the other behind, I suppose?" Dinner retorted with bitter sarcasm.

"No," answered Mr. Larkin. "One gives the other foot every encouragement. Although, so far as I'm concerned, one can take it or leave it, as one likes."

"I'm worried about my drawers," said Mr. Owen.

"Take 'em off, man! Take 'em off!" the Major ruggedly exclaimed. "Your face is not the only old, old story about you."

"No," decided Mr. Owen. "I think I prefer to keep my drawers on. After all, a foot race is serious business."

"Especially when it's on foot," added Mr. Dinner.

"Sure," put in Honor Knightly. "If he were running this foot race on his hands, his drawers would stay up anyway, wouldn't they?"

"How true," remarked Mr. Larkin. "And how unnecessary."

As a consequence of these elaborate preliminaries the two foot racers, Mr. Larkin and Mr. Owen, accompanied by their

supporters, proceeded noisily to the hall, where they took up their positions. They were rather unsteady about this, but meticulous as to details. When they attempted to toe their marks in the conventional posture of the runner, both had to be lifted from their faces upon which they had slowly collapsed. The race itself started somewhat casually, both Mr. Owen and Mr. Larkin having to be pushed into operation. As they trotted down the magnificent hall their friends and admirers followed them at a respectful distance. As a matter of fact, they were forced to gear themselves down in order to keep from outstripping the contestants.

"I didn't know you were a racing enthusiast," observed Mr. Larkin, veering over towards his rival. "To be quite frank I never knew that I was one before. It is jolly if one doesn't go too fast."

"Well, I'm not sure even now," replied Mr. Owen, "whether I'm a racing enthusiast or not. I've often enjoyed myself thinking I was one."

"Are you like that, too?" exclaimed Mr. Larkin, barely getting his best foot forward. "So am I. I dearly love to think of things. Oh, yes, yes. I'm a great thinker. Once I thought I was the Sultan of Turkey and, would you believe it, before I could change my mind, I had dragged seventeen strange women into my house and was eventually discovered chasing a terrified Negro porter with a huge pair of shears. It's amazing, isn't it? I mean when one thinks deeply of anything. I was thinking almost too deeply. You see, I must have wanted a harem down to the last detail."

"The Negro being the last detail," observed Mr. Owen.

"Yes," agreed Mr. Larkin. "It's a good thing for him he could run so fast. He ran even faster than we are now, if anything."

"He had something to run for," commented the other competitor.

"Didn't he, though," agreed Mr. Larkin. "Under similar circumstances I'd have run, too. I'd have fairly torn along —much faster than this."

"Has any special distance been thought of in connection with this race?" Mr. Owen inquired politely.

"None at all, so far as I know," came the cheerful reply. "I guess we'll just keep running round these halls until we get sick of it, or they get sick of us, or we think of something else to do."

"But who wins?" asked Mr. Owen.

"That's for us to decide," Mr. Larkin said with some complacency. "That's where we have the advantage. We hold the winning trick."

"How do you mean?" Mr. Owen wanted to know.

"I'll think that up, too," he was informed, "and let you know later. At the moment everything is in abeyance. We're coming to a corner."

They achieved the corner with dignity if not with speed, and continued on in amiable conversation. And as they progressed, doors opened up along the hall behind them. People in various stages of dishevelment appeared in these open doors and wanted to know things. Not receiving a satisfactory answer, they joined the ranks of the following party to find out for themselves. Presently a considerable crowd of people, ignorant both as to why they were running and where they were running, were milling quite contentedly through the corridors of the hotel. Clerks and page boys arrived on the scene to inquire into the reasons for this unusual activity. Inasmuch as no one was able to enlighten them, they too joined the ranks and started running with the best of them. Presently this impressive body of guests, clerks and attendants overtook and passed the two innocent causes of its existence. They were too busy conversing to give any coherent answers to the questions put to them. They desired to be let alone, and had entirely forgotten why they were there themselves. Looking after the hundreds of figures disappearing down the hall ahead of them, Mr. Larkin's curiosity was aroused in a refined, unobtrusive way.

"Goodness gracious," he exclaimed. "Look at all those persons running round the halls. Wonder where they can be going at this time of night?"

"I don't know about them," observed Mr. Owen, "but I'm getting pretty tired and thirsty. There should be barrooms along these halls for long-distance runners like us."

"Perhaps if we keep on running, we'll come at last to your room, like Magellan—or was it MacFadden?—I don't know which."

At length, barely able to distinguish the best foot from the worst, they staggered through the door of 707 and fell panting on the beds, where they lay until refreshed by a drink. The others, who had lost interest in the race, sat around with glasses in hand and waited patiently while the athletes got their breath.

"Open a bottle of champagne," gasped Mr. Larkin.

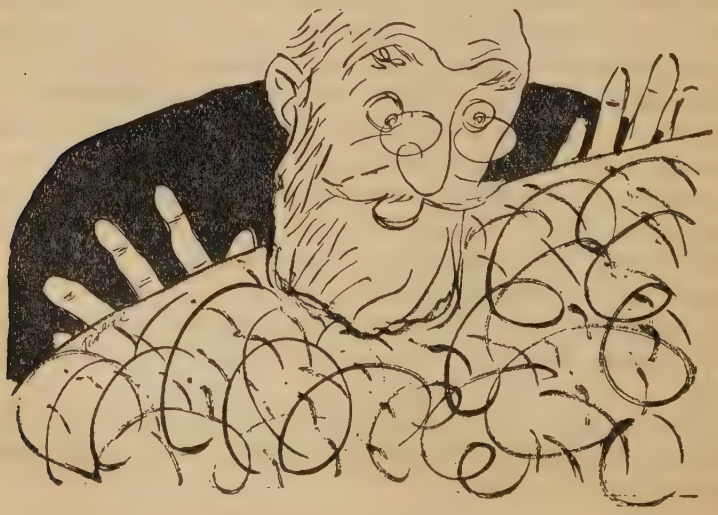
"Are you tired?" Mr. Dinner asked.

"Are we tired?" exclaimed Mr. Larkin. "My God, this hotel is endless. There's absolutely no stopping it. It goes on and on and on just as I do at times. Only I'm never tiresome. We're simply broken reeds, that's all there is to it."

"But who won?" asked Major Barney.

"Won what?" asked Mr. Owen.

"Make yourself clearer," said the senior partner. "There's not a veer left in my mind."



"Why, the race, of course," explained one of the ladies who went with the room. "Who won that?"

"Oh," said Mr. Larkin. "We were running a race, weren't we? That's so, too." He paused as if thinking deeply, then swung his feet off the bed. "From the speed the manager of the hotel was making when we last saw him," he resumed, "I'd say he was making a strong bid for supremacy. We gave our places to him because, after all is said and done, it's his hotel, and if he doesn't deserve to get a little fun out of it, I'd like to know who does."

As nobody else seemed to know, the party turned its attention to more serious matters.

Chapter XV. Behind the Settee

MR. OWEN WAS NEVER ABLE TO RECALL WITH ANY DEGREE OF accuracy all of the events leading up to the closing of that day. And that is, perhaps, just as well for the peace of his overworked soul. However, he was able to recall with almost too convincing vividness exactly how the next one began.

On the mezzanine floor of that splendid hotel there was a

huge settee, cutting off one of the secluded corners of the balcony lounge. And this imposing example of opulent luxury had an inexplicably lofty back. It was in the corner behind this settee that the day of the debauched Mr. Owen began. He did not begin it alone. By no means. He shared it jointly with a woman who was lying in a state of appalling disorder weightily upon his chest. She was face down, and when he awoke and discovered her there he found himself wondering in a dim sort of way why she had not smothered.

Then, with less dimness, he found himself wondering whether she had smothered. Perhaps she had done that very thing and was lying there dead on his chest. To awaken with a dead woman on one's chest is not an encouraging start for a new day. Had he not been rendered unfit by all the devils of a hangover, Mr. Owen would have been subject to panic. As it was he merely lay quite still and considered things. Should he push this dead woman off? No. If she were not quite dead, such a rude act might finish her. And if she were by chance alive, it certainly would enrage her. Far better to have a dead woman on one's chest than an enraged one. It was quieter. Less disturbing. Less upsetting to a man in his delicate condition. A better thing it would be to go into the situation, to make some reasonable, tentative inquiries. He would do that. So he said in a thickly muffled voice: "Who are you?"

The woman stirred faintly. She was not dead but dying. Presently she spoke, and to the prostrate Mr. Owen it sounded as if she were using a large portion of her last breath.

"Just a nameless old moll," she said, "cast up by the river."

Having established Satin's identity, Mr. Owen now attempted to do the same thing for their somewhat sordid locality.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Your honor," inquired Satin, "am I in the witness box?"

"No," he told her. "You're on my chest, most definitely and disastrously on my chest. I am deflated."

The girl rolled off and looked up dizzily at the high back of the settee.

"We must have fallen down the sheer face of a cliff," she observed. "What a way!"

Mr. Owen then put a third terse question.

"How did we get here?" he asked.

"Climbed over, I guess," said Satin. "Or dived."

"How pretty that must have been," reflected Mr. Owen. "We didn't even stop on the sofa proper."

"It wouldn't have been proper to stop on the sofa," was Satin's prim reply.

"With thousands of beds in this hotel at our disposal," continued Mr. Owen bitterly, "we had to pick out a corner behind a damned divan."

"At least it showed a certain amount of nimbleness and determination," she reminded him. "That's saying much for a couple in our condition."

"Did you lure me here or did I lure you?" Mr. Owen wondered.

"As to that, I cannot say," she replied. "Maybe we veered together, as Mr. Larkin would put it. Perhaps now I'm Honor in name only. A sorry business—what?"

"Let's pass over that," he suggested. "It now remains to be established, why did we get here?"

"In pursuit of privacy, I suppose. Or just in the spirit of fun. You know, romping."

It must be mentioned that all the while this unedifying dialogue was progressing a solitary gentleman whose only distinctions in life were a long beard and an inquiring mind was sitting on the other side of the settee. He had come there to peruse his paper in peace and privacy. He had found neither. At first, when these muffled sounds had begun to rise weirdly over the top of the settee, he had not been definitely convinced as to their source. In fact, he had somewhat doubted their actual existence and rather suspected his ears. But as wonder gradually changed to conviction, his amazement and apprehension increased. Abandoning his paper, he listened with a feeling akin to awe. He was a harmless soul but a persistent one. All he wanted to do was to know and to understand. Such persons should more often be discovered murdered in lonely

spots. His curiosity was rapidly becoming unbearable. Also he was a little alarmed. More than a little. He was absolutely confounded. Settees did not usually talk, much less converse. As a matter of truth, they never did either. Never at all. At no time and in no place. This manifestation was positively uncanny.

At this point in the gentleman's reflections, Satin exhibited the bad taste to emit several low but penetrating groans of sheer bodily anguish. They sounded as if they had been wafted from some tortured spirit in hell. This was a little too much for the gentleman's nerves, as well as his curiosity. He must look behind this loquacious couch. He must find out. To achieve this it was necessary for him to kneel on the seat and to peer over its high back. This action gave to the bearded head the effect of having been severed. That is, this is the way the head appeared to those lying directly beneath it. There it was, beard and all, perched gruesomely on the ledge of the settee. Which way it would topple God alone knew. And only He could divine what was the intent of the head, whether it was evil or otherwise. Obviously with such a head it could hardly be otherwise. These were the distressing thoughts that trembled through Mr. Owen's mind as he gazed up for one horror-stricken moment at the apparition peering interestedly down on him. Satin failed to see it, having buried her head in her arms to suffer more privately. Mr. Owen decided to do likewise, and this with all possible speed. It was the only thing left to do, under the circumstances. Accordingly, after having satisfied the demands of his terror in one short, startled shriek, he too rolled over on his stomach and concealed his starting eyes in his arms. The head, equally startled, ducked quickly from view.

"God!" sobbed Mr. Owen. "What was that?"

"What was what?" inquired Satin.

"What I just saw," quavered Mr. Owen.

"Describe it," answered his companion. "In detail."

"Don't ask me to do that," he pleaded. "To think about the thing chills my blood. To describe it would kill me outright."

"Perhaps it will reappear," Satin hopefully observed.

"God could never be so cruel, in spite of all the things I've done," the man replied in a voice of prayer. "It was a terrible thing to see in the best of health. With a hangover, it was beyond—— Oh, let's sing or pray or talk of other things."

"Put your best foot forward," urged the girl, "and tell us what it was."

"It was a head," replied Mr. Owen, almost in a whisper. "Just that. Don't ask for more. Simply but awfully a head."

"What sort of a head?"

"I knew you would ask that," her companion whined. "Does it matter what sort? Just a head of anything is nothing to be sneezed at."

"No," came thoughtfully from Satin. "That wouldn't be nice. That wouldn't show good breeding. Nor would it damage the head greatly."

"You shouldn't jest," declared Mr. Owen. "This was a most unusual head. There was a beard to it."

"Then it must have been a man's head."

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Mr. Owen in hysterical frenzy. "Did you think I was talking of a pig's head?"

"If you had been," replied Satin, "I'd be able to see some sense in it, because I know that if I looked up and suddenly beheld a pig's head peering down it would scare the lights out of me."

"Rather the head of a pig," declared Mr. Owen, "than this devil's head I saw."

"All right," said Satin soothingly. "Now that that's settled, will you tell me what sort of a beard?"

"How do you mean what sort of a beard?" he asked wearily.

"I mean, had it any points of distinction?" explained the girl.

"I don't know the first thing about beards," he moaned back at her. "It was just a beard, you know—all hair."

"Oh," reflected Satin. "I see. All hair. Not a mixed beard. Well, approximately, how long was this beard?"

"Don't even know that, but it was quite long enough."

"Long enough for what?"

"Long enough to upset me for the day," Mr. Owen asserted. "It was a most disconcerting beard!"

"Too vague," replied the girl. "I don't quite see that beard. Now, had it been a long, strong beard you might have grabbed hold of it and pulled yourself up."

Mr. Owen shuddered from both nausea and revolted sensibilities.

"I wouldn't touch a hair of that beard," he stoutly declared. "Not a hair."

"What good would that have done?" demanded Satin. "And besides, it's very hard to touch only one hair in a beard."

"I know nothing about that," Mr. Owen retorted with a feeble show of dignity. "Have you ever tried?"

"Never actually tried, but it stands to reason."

"My reason totters when I think of that beard."

"Well, let's drop the beard," the girl suggested briskly, "and take up the mustache. I suppose there was one?"

"The way you go on," protested the huddled figure, "you'd think I'd studied with loving eyes every line in that horror's face."

"I'd loved to have seen that head with beard attached," Satin observed regretfully, rolling over on her side. Suddenly she dug a finger into Mr. Owen's ribs. He uttered a sharp yelp. "Room mate," she whispered. "Hector! I see it. Roll over and look."

"What! Me look?" chattered her room mate. "Don't be foolish. I've seen it. You look, if you like. Feed your eyes on the ghastly object. Me—never."

Then, with surprising naturalness, the head found voice and spoke.

"What are you doing down there?" it wanted to know.

"Swimming," said Satin coolly. "Swimming. The water's great."

Mr. Owen nudged her frantically.

"Don't go on like that," he whispered. "You're virtually inviting the thing to come down."

"No," said the head. "I mean it. What can you be doing down there?"

"Just flopping about in agony," said the girl. "You know how it is."

"Then why on earth don't you get up and go to your room?" demanded the head.

"Oh, no," replied the girl hastily. "We like it here. We always reserve this space whenever we come to this hotel."

"You do?" said the head in tones of astonishment. "And they let you have it?"

"Swept and garnished," Satin assured him. "With sofa back and rug."

"Goodness gracious," reflected Mr. Owen. "What a woman! She can actually kid that atrocity, while I can't even look at it."

"But I desire very much to read my newspaper," trickled complainingly through the beard dangling above the two bodies. "It's a morning one."

"Then why not read it?" retorted Satin. "We don't want your old paper."

"But how can I do that," the head wanted to know, "with a pair of strange voices directly behind me?"

"In the customary manner," replied Satin. "Or in any way you like. Perhaps if you read aloud we might all be able to get some news."

"Nonsense," expostulated the head. "That would look silly. Suppose someone should come along? There I'd be sitting on the sofa reading aloud to apparently nobody at all. They'd think I was a little cracked."

"Well, aren't you?" inquired Satin. "Strikes me your mental hinges needed a spot of oil somewhere."

"I'll tell you this, my fine lady," snapped back the head. "You're the one who is cracked."

"You shouldn't say that," said Satin severely.

"If not, then," continued the head, "what are you doing down there and how did you get down there, may I ask?"

"You may ask," replied Satin, "but ask someone who knows. Then tell us the answer. We'd be very much interested."

At this point Mr. Owen, assured of the harmlessness of the once frightful object, raised himself feebly on an elbow.

"Will you please go away?" he coldly asked the head.

"Ah!" cried the head. "So at last your husband has the courtesy to address me."

"Am I supposed to engage in conversation with every blessed soul that comes barging into my room?" the man below demanded.

"But it isn't really a room," protested the head. "Not properly speaking. It's a public place, and you're in it. That's all."

"Well, isn't that enough?"

"It's more than enough. It's too much. I want to read my paper. I always read it here."

"Then read it here, damn it," grated Mr. Owen, "but leave us in peace. You have no idea how sick we are."

Immediately Mr. Owen realized he had said the wrong thing. The gentleman belonging to the head was easily interested in almost anything, but nothing fascinated him more than the bodily ailments of others.

"You are?" he exclaimed. "Both of you? I didn't know that. Just what is the trouble?"

"Cholera!" Mr. Owen flung at him.

"Listen, mister," said Satin. "Is there a body attached to that bearded head of yours?"

"Oh, I've body enough," the head replied. "Why?"

"I was only thinking," the girl said, "that if you want to keep it intact you'd better collect its various members and carry them speedily away. This is a plague spot, and you're right in it."

The beard wagged its indecision.

"Although I don't believe you," came through it, "I'm not going to take any chances. I'm going right away and tell the manager."

"Good!" exclaimed Mr. Owen. "He'll love you for that."

Like the sudden dropping of the moon the head slipped from view over the rim of the settee.

"Alone at last," murmured Satin, and without rhyme or reason, placed her lips against the surprised but unreluctant lips of Hector Owen.

"What do you think of that?" she asked after she had finished kissing him as it is given to few men to be kissed, that is, by Satin.

"I'd think quite a lot of it," he said slowly when breath had returned to his body, "if it meant a damn thing to you, but it doesn't."

"That doesn't matter," she said. "What do you think of it as a kiss pure and simple?"

"I think," he replied with conviction, "that it was far from pure and it certainly wasn't simple."

"As to the first, you may be right," she admitted, "but you're wrong about the last part. For me, it's child's play."

"Although you put it somewhat crudely," said Mr. Owen, "you interest me strangely. Do you mean to lie there in shocking disorder and tell me that kiss was a mere sample of your latent powers to destroy the soul of a man?"

"I do," she replied soberly. "Assuming a man has a soul."

"My good, good God," murmured Mr. Owen, brushing the moisture from his forehead. "It is obvious that this woman has no soul."

"How about the body?" asked the girl. "We'll take up the soul later."

"No, we won't," snapped Mr. Owen. "We'll take up the soul right now. As long as I'm behind this damned barricade in broad daylight the body is null and void. It ceases to exist."

"Neither time nor place makes any difference to me," observed Satin.

"Apparently," remarked Mr. Owen dryly, "but in my life they play rather an important part. I don't overstress them, but I observe, at least, a few of the less unreasonable conventions."

"If I ever went gunning for you," she assured him, "you wouldn't observe even those."

"I've no desire to argue with you on that score," he replied hastily. "I know when I've met my master."

"Mistress," corrected Satin.

"Please," protested Mr. Owen, raising an admonitory hand. "As I was saying, I know when I'm licked."

"You weren't," put in the girl. "You weren't saying that at all. And furthermore, you haven't been licked. To hear you talk, one would think I was a cat or a dog."

"I find all this very trying," continued Mr. Owen with an attempt at dignity.

"But I'm not a cat or a dog," insisted Satin. "Am I?"

"No," agreed Mr. Owen without any show of warmth. "You have the worst qualities of both. May I proceed?"

"You mean, may you crawl away somewhere on your stomach?" the girl inquired. "Certainly not. I'd crawl after you on mine."

Mr. Owen closed his eyes and shrank from the picture he saw. He was crawling snakelike through the lobby of the hotel, and behind him, even more snakelike, crawled Satin. People turned to stare after them. They remained turned, transfixed by wonderment. And wherever he crawled, still flat on his stomach, there also crawled Satin, still flat on hers. With a start he opened his eyes to free himself from the spell of this reptilian progress.

"No," he replied in a dazed voice, "I did not mean that. Most decidedly, I did not mean that. I merely wanted to do a little more talking. That's simple enough language, isn't it?"

"I seem to understand it, so it must be," said the girl. "Go ahead and talk if you like. I'll think of something else."

"And I wouldn't give the pale shadow of a bad penny for your thoughts," replied Mr. Owen with a touch of malice.

"All right," she snapped, "but that wasn't what you were going to say."

"No," said Mr. Owen uneasily. "It was merely about that gunning business. Don't go gunning after me unless you really mean it. Somewhere inside I seem to be damn well fed up with that sort of thing." He hesitated and became increasingly self-conscious. "You see," he continued, "I realize I was never cut out to play the rôle of the casual lover. At times I've assured myself that I was—yes, I've kidded myself a lot. That's the trouble with me. I've deceived myself so much I can't bear being deceived by others, especially by a creature I seem to like far more than is strictly necessary."

Once more he paused and looked hopefully at the unresponsive back of the settee as if in search of encouragement therein. Finding none, and refusing to glance at the girl beside him, he took a deep breath and continued. "Before I came here," he said like one trying to recall some lost thought, to remember some forgotten face, "life had not been looking up for me for a long, long time. I can remember that much, at any rate. I must have been living in a depressed area, and it was filled with troubles—all sorts of things. It isn't clear. There's nothing definite, but I know how I felt, how hopelessly beaten I was in all departments. Don't know why I'm talking like this unless it's because all that grog and wine are still boiling in my veins—doing things with my tongue."

He came to a full stop, and in a low voice the girl said, "Go on." Again he started speaking, slowly and haltingly. "There's not much in life for persons like me," he said, "not much except security and sameness. There are dreams into which they escape—impossible damn dreams, dreams in which they are loved as they never have been loved and never will be. And the funny thing about it is no one ever suspects there's enough material in their beings to scrape together the raggedest stepchild of a dream. They're the steady men with unremarkable faces, the men whose wives other men take simply because the women get so damned bored they'd give themselves to the iceman for the sake of a change."

Unconsciously he had clenched his hands. He seemed to have forgotten entirely that he was saying all these things lying huddled in a corner behind a hotel settee. "They believe in loyalty, and they believe in love—some sort of an honest, sporting love—and they are as silly and as stupid as hell. They never take chances, and yet they manage to lose. They never hit the high spots, and yet they land in the low. The poor, spineless saps." The last was spoken in a whisper.

"When I came here," he resumed in an altered voice, "everything was changed. My troubles were left behind and all sense of obligation. I even felt younger, though I don't feel so young this morning. I became a different man, and yet always I must have been that man inside. I no longer want to be moral in

the old sense. I no longer want to be steady, respectable, and smugly sober. And—and I no longer want to be so God damn lonely and uninspired. But I don't want to be gunned at by you, because in spite of your low character and all your bad ways, you seem to mean something, and I just won't have it. There was a woman once. That I know. I can feel it. Where the hell is she now? No more of that sort of thing for me. I'd much rather get tight with loose women and stay tight."

He broke off abruptly and turned his pale, lean face to the girl. He grinned at her crookedly. "That's the sort of chap I am, and you've helped to do it—you and my excellent partners."

Satin's eyes, as she studied the man's face, were unusually bright. And behind the brightness lay other things which Hector Owen had not the penetration to see. There were a certain tenderness and an understanding. There were emotions that surprised the girl herself, but she only smiled half mockingly when she spoke.

"Nonsense," she said, taking him in her arms. "What you need is a nice low-living, hard-drinking girl like myself, and I'm going to see that you get her."

Mr. Owen did.

Chapter XVI. Calm in a Chapel

"I NEVER KNEW I WAS LIKE THAT," MR. OWEN OBSERVED SOME minutes later.

"Neither did I," said Satin lazily. "Like what?"

She was sitting with her back against the wall. Between her lips was a cigarette she had borrowed from her companion. Mr. Owen was arranged in a similar posture, and he, too, was smoking.

"Why, so unremorsefully depraved," he explained. "So ready to accept all the good bad things the moment has to offer."

"I know," she said. "The other things have been forced on you too long. It isn't human to plod in harness, nor is it good for a man's soul to stand too much frustration. God doesn't like it."

"Then you do believe in God?"

"In my God, not in the usual one."

"What sort of God is yours?"

"A smiling God who can even laugh to take the edge off His sorrow. All His good intentions went by the board. He knows what failure is. Should have stuck to animals and left man uncreated. Too late now. He doesn't know what to do about it any more than we do."

"He sounds quite human," observed Mr. Owen.

"How could He be otherwise? He's supposed to deal with humanity."

"I know, but we are given the impression that God is something aloof, remote, forever veiled from the eyes of man."

"Sure. Women suffer even today from the same false rumor. Naturally, it isn't true. If you treat a woman right nine times out of ten she'll skip down from her jolly old pedestal and treat you right. The only reason a woman ever gets up on a pedestal at all is to be seen to better advantage." Satin paused and smiled across at her companion. "Like it here?" she asked.

"It's a swell place," he admitted, "but we can't just park here forever. I'm getting a little nervous about the time and the store and the state of being of my excellent partners."

"Don't worry," she told him. "Things will begin to happen soon."

They did. Hardly had Satin spoken than a sleek head appeared over the rim of the settee.

"Good-morning," said the head.

"Thank God you haven't a beard," replied Mr. Owen.

"I beg your pardon."

"It doesn't matter. I beg yours."

"Thought at first there was a bit of a fire back here," said the head. "And that reminds me of something. The manager says I'll have to ask you to come out now."

"You'll have to do more than ask," Satin replied sweetly. "You'll have to blast us out or rig up some sort of a derrick."

"It is a problem," admitted the head.

"What's a problem?" boomed a familiar voice.

The next moment the heads of the three partners ranged themselves beside that of the sleek gentleman.

"I have been told you're enjoying the cholera," said Mr.

Larkin. "Would you mind flicking us a shot? It might put us out of our misery."

"Is there such a thing as time?" asked Mr. Owen.

"It isn't late," replied the senior partner. "Not at all late for a late morning. And besides, we can always make up for a lot of lost time."

"Are you ready to emerge?" Major Barney inquired.

"Because, if you aren't," put in Mr. Dinner, "we can have some food lowered down to you in buckets."

"We emerge," declared Satin, getting up and stretching her disconcerting young body, "if we can."

"Oh, that can be speedily arranged," said Mr. Larkin. "In fact, I think it best you do come out, or up, or under, or whatever it is. The way business is at present we can't possibly spare the head of the Pornographic Department and one of our most valued partners. Come along, Major."

The heads disappeared. Mr. Larkin's voice was heard issuing commands.

"You take one end, Major," he was saying, "and this gentleman and myself will take the other. Dinner is worse than useless. Only he mustn't expect a ride. Get off the sofa, Dinner. It's heavy enough as it is, God knows. All together now. Heave!"

The edges of the settee parted company with the walls. Miss Honor Knightly stepped gracefully if a little untidily through one aperture while Mr. Owen made his exit through the other. Both joined the partners in front of the settee and received their morning salutations.

"Where's Madame Gloria?" demanded Satin.

"Still sleeping, my dear, still sleeping," said the senior partner. "Such a woman for sleep. She plays hard and rests hard, poor soul. What's a stronger word than veer? I'd like to apply it to my head."

"Swirl," suggested Satin, "twirl, or spin."

"Splendid!" cried Mr. Larkin. "It's doing all three."

"Once more on the road," said Major Barney. "Time is tearing along. These people must wash and we all must eat. Then to the store. It can't get along without us."

"Exactly," agreed Mr. Larkin. "I always like to be present whenever the place is robbed. Things seem to go better then. There's less excitement and scurrying about."

"I hope we're not robbed today," said Mr. Dinner in a bleak voice. "My nerves are jumpy enough as they are, without the added stimulant of thieves."

"Spoken for us all," declared Mr. Larkin. "Let us fly. This gentleman will push the settee back. He's new on the managerial staff. It will be good experience. Good-morning, sir. Forward."

With a slightly dazed expression in his eyes the sleek-headed young gentleman, so beautifully attired, gazed after the departing partners, gallantly ushering that stunning creature down the quiet reaches of the balcony lounge.

Half an hour later the partners and Satin, now spick and span, arrived at the store through the cool fragrance of a glorious morning. At the private entrance to Mr. Larkin's office they paused and turned to look at it—the morning. In the eyes of each was a touch of wistfulness and rebellion.

"What a day!" sighed the senior partner.

"What a night!" said Mr. Owen.

"It's too bad to know how to play," remarked Satin.

"It would be worse to know how to work," observed Mr. Dinner. "I mean, only how to work."

"Don't worry, my children," consoled Mr. Larkin. "A plan is forming. Don't ask me now. It is not quite ready. In the meantime, to your places, but don't overdo it. Don't strain yourselves. We are not in the best condition. And remember, there is always lunch. A cheerful thought."

The Book Department itself was not an uncheerful place in which to spend a hangover, and the Pornographic Section was almost deserted, except for a clean little man in clerical garb who was approaching the counter. There was something about his clean neatness and his mild yet eager expression that made Mr. Owen wish he had lived a better life. Satin gazed on the little preacher with her usual cynical tolerance.

"I'm going to the Holy Land," the preacher informed her happily, "and——"

"My dear sir," cut in Satin, "you were never farther away from that region than you are at this minute."

"Perhaps a book with maps might bring me a little nearer," suggested the little fellow with a disarming smile.

"Do you see that volume upon which your hand is resting?" said Satin. "Well, that's called *Strumpets at Dawn.*"

"How beautiful!" cried the small, clean preacher. "It fascinates me."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Owen involuntarily, and glanced at Satin.

Even that imperturbable young lady appeared to be momentarily stunned.

"But the Holy Land first," the preacher continued agreeably. "Have you such a book?"

"You will find no end of them," replied the girl, "about three aisles farther down—in the Travel Section, sir."

"How nice of you," said the little chap, the eager light in his eyes increasing at the mention of travel. "I think I'll take this one, too, before I go."

"No!" broke from Mr. Owen's lips as Satin selected the book and calmly wrapped it up. "You can't do such a thing."

"Nonsense," retorted Satin. "It will do him a world of good."

The little preacher accepted the package and turned away. "*Trumpets at Dawn,*" they heard him murmur. "How beautiful! How deeply religious!"

Satin and Mr. Owen inspected each other.

"You shouldn't have done that," said the man.

"Why not give the little chap a break for once in his life?" replied Satin. "After he's finished that book, he'll need to go to the Holy Land. Now, there's no particular reason."

"After he's read that book," said Mr. Owen, "he may never go to the Holy Land but spend his savings in riotous living."

"There's no such thing as riotous living," Satin retorted. "It's merely a frame of mind. He was a nice little preacher."

"I hope he stays nice," Mr. Owen remarked skeptically. "I wouldn't read that book myself."

"If you did," she told him, "you would find more beauty and

tenderness in it than in a six-foot bookshelf of inspirational works. That's the truth. Come along now. I want to show you a place."

By way of a spacious lift she took Mr. Owen to the top floor of the building. They stepped out into the subdued, mellow atmosphere of the Music Department.

"It's tranquil here, isn't it?" said Satin, a new note in her rather husky voice.

"After life's fitful fever," murmured Mr. Owen.

Silently gleaming beneath artfully shaded lamps the pianos stood about on the heavy carpet. Between them lay shadowed spaces so that each instrument was isolated in its own pool of radiance. Looking at them Mr. Owen thought of lovely rooms in quiet homes.

"It's awful to think," observed Satin, cutting into his thoughts, "that many of these pianos are doomed to the grubby hands of rebellious little boys and girls. Instruments of torture instead of beauty."

"You would have to say something like that," Mr. Owen told her. "Always throwing flies."

She smiled at him almost sympathetically.

"I must toughen you spiritually," she said, "as well as physically. Come along with me."

Noiselessly they made their way between the pianos until they came to a small stout door that looked as if it should have been set into the ivy-clad wall of a church. Satin opened the door and, passing through, they entered a chamber of utter quietness and peace. It was a long apartment with a high, raftered roof rather than a ceiling. The entire end of the room was occupied by an organ. The windows on either side were of richly stained glass. But for the absence of pews Mr. Owen would have thought himself in a church. The windows were partly open. There was a feeling of wings in the sky. Somewhere outside a band of small birds was chirping. The little chirps sounded speculative and decently modulated in this quiet place. The hum and drone of the city far below only added to Mr. Owen's feeling of remoteness. Here they were

entirely detached from life. It was as if this room might rise at any moment and float away through the blue.

Satin was moving slowly towards the organ. She turned back and smiled at the man behind her. He decided there was a quality exceedingly lovely in that smile.

"Bring your hangover down here," she said, "and rest it comfortably by the organ. Whenever my breast becomes too savage I come to this place and play to it."

In a deep chair near the organ Mr. Owen sat down and rested his head. It no longer seemed so hot and tired. Within him there was a sense of peace. Gradually little liquid notes began to splatter round him like refreshing drops of rain. Satin played. Time swept by unheeded on a tide of low, throbbing harmony. Thoughts strayed idly through Mr. Owen's mind. They were vague, these thoughts, for he was unable to place himself. More like sensations they were—remembrance of things too remote to name. Far-away days and far-away feeling. Time when it was young, before it had grown a fretting beard. As the velocity of the notes increased from a shower to a flood of melody, Mr. Owen changed the position of his head the better to observe the figure at the organ.

"She might be a priestess," he reflected, a little thrilled, "instead of a hard-boiled purveyor of indecent literature."

There was an expression on Satin's face he had never seen there before. Emotions seemed to be straining within her, crying to be released. As he looked at the girl he felt that one barrier had been removed only to be replaced by another. To him she was still as enigmatic and as baffling as before. There was beauty here unquestionably, but now it was beauty in pain, in conflict with itself. Through the medium of the organ her fingers were searching for something, for a completeness, it seemed, beyond life, beyond her days as she lived them. Suddenly she stopped. The sobbing notes fled through the stained-glass windows, but little wraiths of harmony still lingered in the hushed air of the room. She swung round on the bench and sat for a moment contemplating Mr. Owen. Her eyes were large and dark and touched with the spell of her playing. But her lips were disturbingly mocking.

"Suppose," she said quite distinctly, "I should tell you I loved you. Would that do any good?"

"It would be better than a quart of aspirins," he replied.

"Would it? Then consider it said."

"Why?" asked Mr. Owen.

"Because I do," said Satin.

"Still why?"

"Don't ask me that. There is no special reason."

"I can think of none myself," Mr. Owen replied. "No good and sufficient ones. You can't play away the years, you know. I own to a number of them."

"Let me worry about your years," the girl told him. "They're none of your business so far as I'm concerned." She hesitated, and for the first time Mr. Owen detected a suggestion of timidity in her bearing. "Think I'm a pretty hard girl, don't you?" she advanced. "All sexed up and everything—an easy make?"

"Not all of that," said Mr. Owen, "but I wouldn't go so far as to call you sexless."

"You'd better not," the girl replied. "I'd consider that an insult. What's all this noise about sex, anyway? Why make it a vice and keep it in the dark? It's an amiable gesture, after all. Why not make nerves a vice, or egotistical talking, or patriotic speeches, or spying on one's neighbors, or interfering with one's personal liberty, attempting to supervise a person's conduct, or any number of things beside which sex is a mere flash in the pan. As a matter of fact, sex is swell. I thoroughly enjoy it."

"That makes us even," admitted Mr. Owen, "but my greater wisdom tells me it can be misused. I mean, a man so often slips round the corner on his woman or vice versa. You know, not playing the game, and getting emotions all mucked up."

"That's just rotten," said the girl slowly. "And it's worse because it's so unnecessary. People who cheat like that want two things at once. They lack in guts."

"Forcefully if not nicely put," observed Mr. Owen.

"Come over here," said the girl.

He sat on a stool at her feet. She leaned over him and taking

his head in her arms, held it against her breast. The moments passed and neither of them spoke. A still room. Only the notes of birds.

"Well, Mr. Man," she said at last, "I'm not so sexy as you think. I've had only a few moments—never a real lover."

"That, also, is none of my business," replied Mr. Owen. "I suspect your good judgment far more than your morals."

"Why?"

"For various reasons I'm one of them."

She pushed his head up from her and looked into his eyes.

"How long have you been lonely?" she asked irrelevantly.

"How do you know I have?"

"The look's there. I found a lost dog once."

"Thanks," said Mr. Owen. "Aren't we all?"

She was holding his head now rather carelessly in her lap, much as if she were holding a cantaloupe or a grapefruit. Above his head she was gazing dreamily through one of the windows at a small white cloud drifting past.

"Perhaps," she admitted. "Yes. I've been, but I'm not going to be any more. I have you now."

"Right," said Mr. Owen. "But what about the head? Have you finished using it? I'm afraid it will roll off."

"No," she replied with determination. "I want the head. I feel like hugging it."

"All right, but just don't forget it. After all, it's a head."

Once more he felt his face pressed against the firm young breast of the girl. He cleverly contrived to breathe without thwarting her purpose. He liked it that way. He had a feeling of having come home at last. Peace entered into his so long troubled soul, or whatever it was that served for one.

"I can't remember," he told her. "And I don't want to."

"Good," she said. "Do you love me?"

The head nodded vigorously.

"I guess that will have to do," remarked the girl. "Then we're sweethearts, you and I?"

This time the head nodded rather bashfully.

"Yes," he said. "I guess that's what we are."

"How nice," mused Satin. "Never had a sweetheart proper. Not a regular one. Are you glad?"

Then it was that Mr. Owen abandoned his passive rôle and took the girl in his arms with surprising zest and vigor.

"You must be glad," she managed to get out at last. "Thanks. That was very nice. We must find a little place and begin to live very busily together. I have no ties."

"My bridges are down," replied Mr. Owen with a shrug. "Thank God they led to you. Don't let me ever remember—only you, Satin."

"That's the decentest thing you've said. I guess that's why you found me, or rather, why I found you."

They were standing now, facing one of the windows. Below them throbbed the city and around them swam the sky. It was one of those moments. Both seemed to feel it. Mr. Owen did not know what it was, but it was there—all that his heart could carry.

"Of course," he heard the girl saying, "you'll have to be careful about beds—whose you get in. But I won't be strict. Running around with those partners, God knows what might not happen."

As if the mere mention of them was sufficient to call them into being, the little door opened, and the three gentlemen came swinging down the room. Mr. Owen grinned. They looked for all the world like God-fearing, sober-sided vestrymen. They should have held plates in their hands.

"At last!" exclaimed Mr. Larkin. "At last! Although, I must say, this is a far cry to the Pornographic Department. Can you imagine what I've done?"

"I don't like to think about it," said Mr. Owen.

"Well, you will," proudly retorted the senior partner. "I've declared a holiday."

"Go on," said Satin. "For everybody?"

Mr. Larkin nodded.

"Even for Horrid and Blue Mould," he assured her.

"Sweet man," said Satin.

Chapter XVII. Lascivious Dancing

"AM I NOT?" REPLIED MR. LARKIN. "ALL THE GIRLS ARE SAYING that today, at any rate. What a time we had getting our customers out of the store."

"Never saw the place so full," observed Mr. Dinner.

"One large lady came charging back at me three times," declared Major Barney, "before I successfully repulsed her. Said she wanted to buy a bird cage."

"The poor thing," remarked Mr. Larkin sadly. "And the bird. I suffer for the bird, too. But still, all work and no play would simply be too bad. Besides, people buy too many things, anyway. Everybody wants to own something. Would you believe it? Frequently I haven't a shirt to my back, and we have a counter devoted entirely to shirts—lovely ones. I rebel. I refuse to participate. I feel like giving my possessions away and running naked through the streets. Of course, I should wear shoes. Light ones."

"Are we to spend our holiday mentally watching you run naked through the streets?" Mr. Dinner inquired.

"Naked save for shoes," corrected the senior partner. "I have the most amazingly sensitive feet. They fairly shriek at the approach of a pebble."

"I must confess," observed the Major, "that your thoughts are veering today as they have never veered before."

"But people do grab and snatch," Mr. Larkin protested. "You'll have to admit that. They do grab and snatch. Makes me so ashamed, I'm frequently reluctant to approach one of my own counters on some slight personal mission. Therefore, my back sometimes finds itself without a shirt." He turned to Mr. Owen as if in search of an understanding heart. "You see how it is," he resumed. "Our partners are too degenerate to care about backs and shirts. Drawers are a joke to them, if they ever think of them at all."

"I thoroughly understand," said Mr. Owen, "and sympathize deeply. Do you like to drink?"

The senior partner's face brightened visibly. He clasped his hands.

"Immensely!" he exclaimed. "Copiously! How did you ever know? Why, you removed the very words from my mouth. I was going to suggest that we all go out and get ourselves rotten drunk, if you'll pardon the expression."

"God, yes!" cried the Major. "It's the only intelligent thing you have said."

"And then we'll dance lasciviously with lewd women," continued Mr. Larkin. "Oh, life, life, life and a whole lot of lust."

"He's outdoing himself today," said Mr. Dinner in a low voice. "These poetic raptures of his will get us all into trouble."

"Where shall we go?" asked Mr. Dinner.

"I suggest the Woods," said the senior partner. "There'll be a large, open taxi, and we'll all get in it."

"What's the Woods?" Mr. Owen wanted to know.

"Oh, a jolly place," replied Mr. Larkin. "There are woods, you know."

"I know," said Mr. Owen. "Just woods?"

"Heavens, no!" exclaimed Mr. Larkin. "What would we do

with a lot of woods? There are other things—acrobats, for example. I know a couple of artists. They contort. We'll have them to lunch with us."

"I know the man who handles the bears," announced the Major. "A sterling character."

"It would be safer if he were of iron," observed the senior partner, "or brass, if he associates with those bears. They're a hard lot. I know them."

"May I suggest," put in Mr. Owen, "that we begin actively to enjoy these rare delights instead of merely discussing them?"

"You may and you shall," Mr. Larkin declared. "Let us hurl ourselves into a lift and then debauch into the boulevards. Holidays come to us too rarely. We must take advantage of everything and everybody. Hats and sticks are in my office."

As they left the little chapel, as Mr. Owen had come to regard it, he glanced back almost regretfully. It had been a pleasant retreat. He still saw in fancy Satin seated at the organ, playing away his hangover.

"It was quiet here, wasn't it?" he said to her in a low voice.

"Yes," she answered, "and eventful, but now the battle is on. These men are entirely mad, and we are not much better."

"It isn't such a thin way to be," observed Mr. Owen philosophically. "There's plenty of room in my system for a lot of madness."

Satin made no reply but pressed his thin hand as the door closed behind them. A few minutes later they were debauching into the street.

"On such a morning as this," declared Mr. Larkin, "an employer would be a criminal not to declare a holiday."

"Especially when he wanted one himself," remarked Satin.

"Exactly, my dear, exactly," said Mr. Larkin. "The Major might know a sterling bear tamer, but he overlooks the fact that my heart is entirely of gold. I love to share my pleasures. Ah, yes, indeed, to share and let share. Taxi! I hope he stops. That's just the kind."

He did stop, and the party with much dignity and seemliness distributed its members upon the seats of the open taxicab. Soon they were speeding along the handsome boulevard in

the direction of the Woods. Suddenly Mr. Larkin spied a café and became highly excited.

"We must stop there for a rest," he proclaimed. "It's simply filthy with lewd women—the lewdest and lowest in town. Also the most beautiful. Stop at the Wild House, taxi. We will break our journey there."

The Wild House was doing good business for so early in the day. Already the tables were well filled, and the floor was sprinkled with dancers. Mr. Owen regarded the couples a little nervously in an effort to ascertain how lasciviously they were dancing. He did not know the first thing about it and was not at all sure whether he wanted to learn.

"Captain," Mr. Larkin commanded, "we want something just a trifle better than the best table in the house."

"Certainly, Mr. Larkin," replied the captain. "Be seated right here at this one. It's a new table."

"How nice!" exclaimed the senior partner as the party arranged itself round the table. "I am greatly pleased. New tables affect me that way. Now, captain, we intend to get very drunk and perhaps disorderly. You know, the strain. It has been great. It has been terrific. One must relax with a crash. Bring us lewd women. We wish to dance lasciviously while we're still on our feet."

The captain understood perfectly. He was almost sympathetic about it. He glided away, as captains do. Presently the party was reinforced by four girls. Mr. Owen could not remember ever having seen such evil-looking faces. At the same time he had to admit that these women were not without an element of fascination.

"Don't mind me," Satin whispered to him. "You have to go through with it now. Dance with one of these molls when the time comes. I'll stay here and pick up the pieces."

"All this is very upsetting," Mr. Owen complained. "I can hardly dance decently, much less the other way—lasciviously, as he keeps calling it in a very nasty manner."

The drinks came thick and fast. Everyone began to feel better. The dark eyes of the senior partner were gleaming with

infantile happiness. He rose abruptly from his chair. The orchestra had burst into a frenzy of syncopation.

"Now, ladies," he said, "you must take us out there on that floor and make us dance lasciviously whether we want to or not. We are on a bit of a holiday, you know. The strain has been great. We must relax all over the floor."

Before Mr. Owen knew what was happening, he felt himself seized, dragged from his chair, and whirled out upon the slippery dance floor.

"Darling!" breathed his woman, and, swirling suddenly, bent forward seductively and dealt him a terrific blow with the most prominent part of her body. Mr. Owen was entirely unprepared for this particular manifestation of lasciviousness. He was literally shot through space and would have fallen had he not slid into the senior partner, who seemed to be performing the same maneuver. In mutual protection they clasped each other round the neck.

"We seem to be alone," remarked the senior partner. "God! My woman's lascivious. She's nearly killed me already."

"What do they wear in their pants?" gasped Mr. Owen. "Horseshoes?"

"No, my boy, it's training. They're in perfect condition, these girls."

"Must we go back?" asked Mr. Owen. "I feel shattered."

"We can't very well stand here embracing one another," said Mr. Larkin.

With a wrench they were torn apart. Mr. Owen found himself once more in the arms of his lewd woman.

"Slow down," he pleaded.

"Not with you in my arms," she panted.

"Well, why the hell don't you keep me there," he managed to get out as they spun, "instead of buffeting me about?"

"This is the double rumba," the woman told him, and thrust a powerful leg between his.

Once more they parted company. Mr. Owen's legs were as tangled as human legs can well get. For a brief moment he gave the appearance of a man giving a solo performance; then as nature sought to readjust itself, he involuntarily spun about

and dived on top of Mr. Dinner, who, very white in the face, was sliding on his back stiffly across the floor.

"Sorry," said Mr. Owen. "Couldn't help it."

"How's your woman?" asked Mr. Dinner exhaustedly.

"I don't know how lascivious she is," Mr. Owen replied, "but I do know she's as tricky as hell."

"Mine pulled a fast one on me with her stomach," explained Dinner. "I fairly bounced off like a rubber ball."

"Shall we get up?" suggested Mr. Owen. "Or relax all over the floor?"

"I suppose we better had," sighed Mr. Dinner, "though we're a great deal safer here."

The two gentlemen arose painfully only to find their partners cutting various capers round them while snapping their fingers in the air. Mr. Owen regarded his woman broodingly. His manhood was stirred, but hardly lasciviously. Awaiting his opportunity, he made a sudden wicked lunge. He caught the woman about her revolving stomach and carried her halfway across the room. There, encountering an entangling foot, she went over backward with Mr. Owen on top.

"That's the half Nelson," he grated, glaring down in her face.

"Not here," said the woman, game to the last.

"Do you think I did that for pleasure?" he indignantly demanded.

"*Chéri,*" she whispered.

"*Chéri,* hell!" exclaimed Mr. Owen. "I'm sick of this double rumble and the whole brutal business."

He climbed to his feet and helped the woman to hers. With a crash the music fell silent. They made their way back to the table.

"Waiter!" cried Mr. Larkin, "bring me two collar buttons and one safety pin. What a dance! What a dance! So stirring. I fear I'll never stop drinking."

Satin was busy getting Mr. Owen back into some sort of condition. He was still eyeing his lewd partner with a dangerously hostile light in his usually mild blue eyes. It looked as if at any moment he might hurl himself upon her and pitch

her across the floor. He felt very much like doing it if only to ease his injured dignity.

"Want a rub-down?" suggested Satin.

"General overhauling," he muttered. "Lay me up in dry-dock like a battered old hulk. That little affair was worse than a bullfight."

"Do you gentleman wish to take further advantage of this splendid opportunity to dance lasciviously?" Mr. Larkin inquired.

Mr. Dinner laughed a shade hysterically.

"How beautifully you put it," he said. "The answer is, no. I don't intend to let any more lascivious dancing take advantage of me."

"How about you, Major?"

"I managed to keep my feet," that gentleman explained, "but I think I'm internally injured. I'm quite willing to declare the battle a draw."

"Not today, thank you so much," said Mr. Owen politely. "I didn't manage to keep my feet, and I know I'm internally injured."

"Then the lewd women may withdraw," announced the senior partner. "I'm sure you did your best, and we're all very grateful. The captain will give you your fee."

As the girls filed away, Mr. Larkin looked fondly after them.

"Such nice, willing girls," he murmured, "and so very, very lewd."

"Hell hath no fury like the double rumble," quoth Mr. Owen.

"Rumba, dear," said Satin.

Beneath the table Mr. Larkin's hands were doing things with the safety pin. On his face was an expression of profound concentration mixed with a shade of alarm.

"There!" he exclaimed at length in accents of relief. "They're fixed. Shall we skip along to the next stop?"

The party rose and departed. Soon it was speeding merrily along in the direction of the Woods. Arrived at that gracious

park they rushed to the nearest café, where they drank like men but recently rescued from the desert.

"A thirsty dance, the rumba," breathed the senior partner, gulping down a champagne cocktail.

"Especially when it's double," put in Mr. Owen.

"Let's all go swimming," suggested Satin.

For a moment the partners paused and seemed to consider. Fresh cocktails arrived and were hastily dispatched. After this there was no more hesitation. They were enthusiastic about going swimming. Nothing could restrain them.

A short walk brought them to the pool. It gleamed beneath the sunlight, blue water caught in marble. Today the large pool contained a frolicsome rout of bathers. Mr. Owen looked at the women, and his heart went out to them. Never had he seen such lovely figures so satisfyingly unadorned. What little covering they wore literally hung on a thread. Many of them seemed to have clad themselves on a shoe string. At the sight of so much beauty the partners, like old war horses, threw back their shoulders and put their best foot forward. Satin remained undisturbed. She knew she had little to fear where figures were concerned. God had been gracious to her. She departed to the bath houses and bought a ravishing outfit, feeling the occasion justified the expense.

Mr. Owen, who seemed to possess an instinctive knowledge of bath-house technique, found the partners no end of a bother. The first thing they succeeded in doing was to lock themselves in their bath houses. The din they raised was deafening. Attendants came running from all directions while Mr. Owen vainly strove to appeal to the imprisoned gentlemen's reason. Apparently at that moment they did not intend to exercise any reason.

"God Almighty by the score!" exclaimed the senior partner as he emerged. "What are they trying to do to us—give us claustrophobia?"

The attendants blinked.

"Wot's that?" asked one of them.

"Don't worry," Mr. Larkin assured the man. "You'll never get it. It has to do with the mind. Hurry away like a good

fellow and bring us a swarm of drinks—champagne cocktails. I must and will relax."

The next contretemps arose over the showers. The partners strongly objected to being forced to immerse themselves. Mr. Owen, who had returned to his bath house to get his cigarettes, heard their voices raised in indignant protest.

"If I got under that shower," Mr. Larkin was saying, "it would be tantamount to a public declaration that I was an unclean man. I'll not do it."

"And if I stepped under that shower," rumbled the Major, "I would feel myself demeaned. I'm too big and too old to be forced to take a bath."

"It's an outrage, that's what it is, an outrage," vociferated Mr. Dinner. "I lost ten pounds I could ill afford to spare under a shower this morning. I'm as clean as a whistle."

"Or a hound's tooth," added Mr. Larkin.

"I don't care what the lot of you say," put in the flint-hearted attendant. "You don't go in the pool unless you take a shower."

"We will and we won't," Mr. Larkin declared.

Mr. Owen decided it was high time to take a hand in the affair of the showers. He presented himself to the group. His partners were well crocked. He could see that at a glance. He himself was feeling a trifle giddy, but some sixth sense still held him to the rails.

"What do you mean, you will and you won't?" demanded the attendant. "That don't make sense."

"I've forgotten," replied Mr. Larkin. "It was just a thing to say."

The situation seemed to be at an impasse, but suddenly Mr. Owen was seized by an inspiration. Without a word to his colleagues he deposited his cigarettes in a dry place, and hurrying to the nearest shower, began to splash water about with every indication of enjoyment. The partners looked at him in astonishment which gradually changed to simple-minded interest. They grouped themselves before him.

"Why are you doing that thing?" Mr. Larkin wanted to know.

"For no particular reason," Mr. Owen replied in a careless voice. "I always do it before entering a pool. It takes the edge off of the first plunge."

For a moment the three gentlemen eyed one another speculatively, then as if moved by a common impulse they dashed to the showers under which they furiously sprayed themselves.

"We always do it too," shouted Major Barney, "but we don't like to be told."

"Oh, dear me, yes," called Mr. Larkin. "Nothing like a shower before taking a swim. I'd simply be lost without one."

"Tact is what they need, these attendants," proclaimed Mr. Dinner. "Tact and a deeper understanding of the human soul."

Eventually Mr. Owen succeeded in herding them to the deep end of the pool, where Satin, looking shockingly shapely, was waiting.

"My word!" exclaimed the senior partner. "Just to look at you makes me believe in God. You never simply evolved. Oh, no. You were most carefully planned."

"Did they make you take a shower?" asked Mr. Dinner.

"No," replied Satin. "I always take a shower."

"Isn't that splendid!" cried Mr. Larkin. "So do we, my dear girl, so do we. In fact, we're seldom without one."

Without a word of warning the Major threw himself away. For a moment he was seen scrambling hugely through the air, then the pool received his great body and concealed it. Mr. Owen watched with interest. The Major should be a powerful swimmer, but why was he not swimming? Why did he not come up? Presently his head did emerge. There was a frantic thrashing about. His face wore a surprised expression.

"I forgot——" he gurgled, but the water once more claimed him.

"Now, what could he have forgotten?" queried Mr. Larkin.

"Perhaps he forgot he couldn't swim," Mr. Dinner suggested.

"Can't he swim?" Mr. Owen demanded.

"Not a stroke," replied Mr. Dinner.

"Then what did he jump in for?" Mr. Owen asked incredulously.

"Well, you see," explained the senior partner, "just because he couldn't swim the last time doesn't mean that he couldn't swim this time. People change, you know."

"Then the man is actually drowning," said Mr. Owen.

"That's it exactly," Mr. Larkin assured him. "You've sized up the situation nicely. The poor dear Major is drowning all by himself."

Looking disgustedly at his associates, Mr. Owen, without a word, dived into the pool. As he did so the Major's head reappeared and he finished his sentence in a great watery gasp.

"—I couldn't swim," he got out, and then he went down again.

Realizing the hopelessness of attempting to drag the Major ashore, Mr. Owen resorted to desperate measures. He took the drifting body on his shoulders and thrust himself upward and forward. Twice he emerged for air and left the Major to his own devices. Finally, after a series of plunges and pushes, he succeeded in bringing his cargo to shallow water, where he abandoned it. The Major clung to the side of the pool and made horrid noises. Mr. Owen did likewise, only his noises were not as bad as the Major's. Finally, the big man quieted down.

"Thanks for the lift," he said. "It's so difficult to find out whether one knows how to swim or not."

Mr. Owen had no decent answer to his. He pulled himself from the pool and rejoined Satin and Mr. Larkin. In the midst of their congratulations he remarked the absence of Mr. Dinner.

"Where's Dinner?" he demanded.

"Dinner?" inquired Mr. Larkin as if hearing the name for the first time. "Ah, yes, Dinner. Why, the little fellow must have stepped off into the pool somewhere."

"Does he know how to swim?"

"Even less than the poor dear Major," said the senior partner, "but you know how he is—hopeful, always hopeful."

"Has he been gone long?" asked Mr. Owen.

The senior partner considered this.

"Not quite long enough," he said at last. "He should have a few moments left."

"What do you mean?" cried Mr. Owen.

"Before he is dead, you know," was Mr. Larkin's bland reply.

"My God," muttered Mr. Owen, desperately scanning the pool, "what utter irresponsibility!"

Suddenly he saw a foot thrust up through the water—a small, thin foot that was wiggling appealingly. As winded as he was, he dived back into the pool and made for the foot. Dinner climbed all over him. He was an exceedingly active small man. He appeared to be bent on drowning his would-be rescuer. Mr. Owen saw little hope as he fought with the man in the water. Just as he was about to pass out himself he succeeded in stunning Dinner and dragging him to the side of the pool. Mr. Larkin was bending over in an effort to be helpful. To his own surprise and horror he fell in with a protesting splash. Cursing as bitterly as his strength would permit, Mr. Owen passed the limp body of Mr. Dinner up to the strong arms of Satin and turned wearily to look for Mr. Larkin. That gentleman was just emerging.

"I'm an awful ass in the water," he cried. "You'll have to do——"

Down went Mr. Larkin, for once unable to have his say.

Under ordinary circumstances the rescue of the senior partner would have presented little difficulty. In his present condition of exhaustion Mr. Owen was taxed up to and beyond his capacity. Nevertheless, he went for Mr. Larkin and seized him by his hair.

The space separating them from the side of the pool was not great, but to the spent Owen it seemed leagues long. At last, with the assistance of Satin, he got his burden out of the water.

"Any more?" he croaked, grinning ironically up at the girl.

Instead of answering, she reached down and pulled him over the side of the pool. He collapsed by Mr. Larkin, who had collapsed by Mr. Dinner. Several yards away the Major had collapsed by himself.

"Can you swim?" Mr. Owen asked Satin wearily.

The girl nodded.

"Well, will you please dive in there," he went on, "and swim

about a bit? Sort of represent the firm. I'm *hors de combat.*"

While Satin sported in the water the partners lay crumpled grotesquely round the edge of the pool. "A hell of a way to go swimming," Mr. Owen kept saying to himself. He was bitter about it. Presently the senior partner weakly raised his head.

"The only way," he said, "to rid ourselves of the memory of this horrid debacle is to have an excellent luncheon. At least we know how to eat."

"And drink," added Dinner faintly.

Chapter XVIII. The Partners Purchase a Whale

THE PARTY HAD NOW BEEN AUGMENTED BY THE PRESENCE of two contortionists and one snake charmer. The contortionists were man and wife. The snake charmer was just man and snake, but that was enough. By his side was an old potato sack which Mr. Owen regarded with the deepest mistrust. He could not help wondering how the senior partner ever managed to meet such odd characters. Then he thought of the senior partner and ceased to wonder. The man himself was an odd character. They did not come any odder.

They were gathered round a large table in a large café. This festive establishment was situated in an amusement resort contiguous to the park. Merry-go-round music droned and shrieked through the air. The energetic voices of barkers, proclaiming the allurements of their respective attractions, could be heard. Occasionally the shattering sound of a scenic railway broke in upon them as the cars hurtled round the sharp curves. Everyone was apparently having a good time in a vigorous sort of way, but no one was having a better time than the partners themselves. Mr. Owen marveled at their recuperative powers. He was exhausted beyond measure, while they seemed as fresh as the dawn.

"See over there?" said the Major to Mr. Owen, pointing to a high wall in the distance. "Well, that's where the bears live."

"In happy amity with their trainer of sterling character," Mr. Owen replied with a grin.

The Major thought this over.

"No," he said at last. "They hate him. They even hate themselves, those bears."

Mr. Larkin got up from his chair and raised his glass.

"To our savior!" he cried, indicating Mr. Owen. "Without him we would have been full of pool water instead of champagne."

Everyone at the table save Mr. Owen arose and drank the toast. He regarded them with a caustic smile.

"I wonder," he said when they had reseated themselves, "just what is going to happen next. This is supposed to be a holiday, and yet all we do is to punish ourselves almost beyond endurance. That lascivious dancing was a dangerous riot. The pool was a downright disaster. Are we going to settle down now and have a nice quiet time?"

As he spoke he glanced about the table, then became rigid in his chair. A six-foot snake was peering deeply into his eyes. Honor Knightly gave a small shriek and put her napkin over her head. Mr. Owen, considering it a wise idea, falteringly did

likewise. The snake charmer was laughing heartily and with truly disgusting oiliness.

"Kim is hungry," he gurgled. "Poor Kim."

"Tell Kim he can have my steak," replied Mr. Owen in tremulous tones, "if he'll only go away."

"But, my dear sir, Kim is quite harmless," explained its owner. "He merely wants to play."

"He isn't harmless to me," Mr. Owen assured the man, "and I'm far from feeling playful. I've been unhappy before in my life, but never quite as unhappy as I am at this moment."

In a burst of affection Kim curled himself gently round Mr. Owen's neck. The snake charmer roared his approval. Mr. Owen sat very still in his chair.

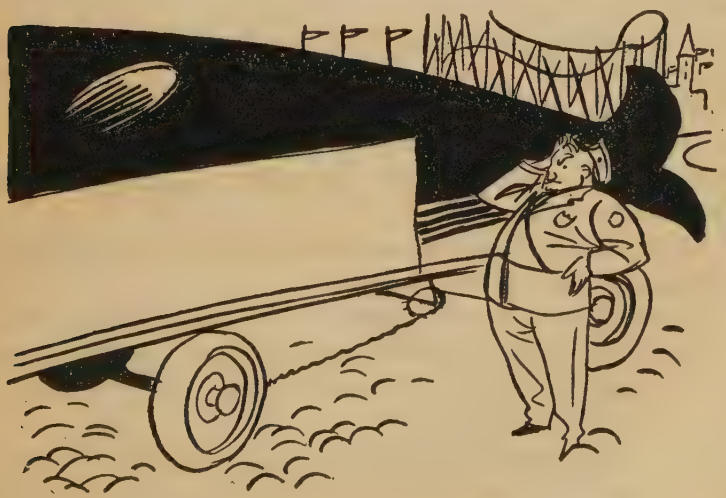
"Listen," he said in a low voice, "I believe I'm going to die."

"What's it doing to you?" came Satin's muffled voice.

"More than flesh can bear," Mr. Owen answered, then laughed crazily. "Luncheon!" he said in a bitter voice. "A nice quiet luncheon."

Kim, disturbed by the laughter, slowly uncoiled himself and returned to his master, who dropped him carelessly back in the sack.

"Has Kim gone away yet?" asked Satin in a hushed voice.



"Entirely," Mr. Larkin assured her. "To the last inch. You may come out from under your napkin."

Pale and wan, Mr. Owen's face reappeared. He regarded the table feverishly, then gulped down a glass of wine.

"I hope that exhibition failed to amuse you," he said to his partners. "You weren't convulsed with mirth?"

"Not with mirth," put in Mr. Dinner. "Kim did me little good."

"I agree," said the senior partner. "A mere fraction of Kim goes a long, long way."

Mr. Owen returned to his plate and manfully endeavored to eat. He felt that he owed his stomach a little solid food. As he raised his fork to his mouth he chanced to glance across the table at the lady contortionist. His mouth remained open, but the fork refused to enter. In some weird manner the woman had contrived to dislocate her neck so that her head was hanging down between her side and her left arm. In this inverted position she was daintily sipping champagne while gazing unwinkingly at Mr. Owen. That gentleman was fit for the madhouse. His eyes bulged in his head. Never in all his life had he been so shockingly revolted. He tried to speak, but no words came. At last his tongue obeyed the dictates of his tortured mind.

"Is she going to be like that," he quavered, "throughout the rest of the meal?"

"Why not?" inquired her husband.

"Can't you see that for yourself?" muttered Mr. Owen. "Do you expect me to swallow food with that head dangling there before my eyes?"

"They feel that they owe us something for their luncheon," soothingly explained Mr. Larkin.

"Her debt is paid with interest," Mr. Owen replied. "Tell her she's too kind. Tell her I'd be more than satisfied if she'd stick to cracking her knuckles or dislocating her thumbs. It takes so little to amuse me."

The contortionist spoke to his wife in a low voice. The lady angrily shook her head. This gesture of negation had a devas-

tating effect on Mr. Owen. He closed his eyes and clung to the table.

"She says," came the voice of the contortionist, "that she intends to stay that way. She gets double the effect from the champagne with her head hanging down."

"So do I," muttered Mr. Owen. "In fact, I don't have to drink at all."

"Perhaps this will take your mind off the head," suggested the contortionist. "It's one of my favorite stunts."

"What is?" asked Mr. Owen, clinging to a straw.

He opened his eyes, then almost fell from his chair. With unhurried efficiency the contortionist was feeding himself with his feet. The daintiness with which he did this only added to Mr. Owen's feeling of horror and revulsion.

"My word!" Mr. Larkin exclaimed in a voice of awe. "That's enough to take one's mind off everything. I'm actually rotating in my chair."

"If they'll only stop what they're doing," said Mr. Owen, "I'll let that snake sit on my lap."

"Why, this is a cinch to do," the contortionist proclaimed. "I can keep it up all day."

"It must be easier to do than to look at," Mr. Owen told him. "If you enjoy your food that way, won't you eat it at another table?—at some table far back of me."

"Nonsense," scoffed the contortionist, deftly spearing a piece of steak with a fork held in his left foot.

With fascinated eyes Mr. Owen watched the leg as it conveyed the fork to its owner's mouth. Then he looked at Mr. Larkin, who was feeling no little disturbed himself.

"Did I understand you to say," asked Mr. Owen distinctly, "that we must all relax, that the strain has been terriffic, and that we needed a bit of a holiday?"

Mr. Larkin met his partner's cold eyes apologetically.

"Well, you see," he began lamely, "I'm always hoping things will turn out for the best. It's my nature."

"If this keeps up much longer," announced Mr. Dinner, "I'm going to put my plate on the floor and gnash my food like a beast."

"The trouble is," said Major Barney, "they get me all mixed up. I can no longer coördinate my movements. Only a moment ago I was deliberately trying to sip champagne with my ear."

"I was searching for my mouth," put in Satin, "and I jabbed myself an awful crack in the stomach. Bet you it left marks. Shall I look?" Here she glanced at Mr. Owen.

"Don't begin!" he admonished her. "Don't begin! We'll take those marks for granted. There are enough public exhibitions going on as it is."

At this moment Kim's malevolent head slid stealthily between Mr. Owen's frozen limbs and appeared at the table. For a long minute, during which the man was too petrified to breathe, the snake examined the contents of his plate. At length, having come to a decision, Kim selected the steak, snapped it up with a hiss of pleasure, and started to withdraw. Mr. Owen sucked in his stomach as the snake slid down the front of him. His eyes were tightly shut, and there was a prayer in his heart.

"Ah, what a pity," came the solicitous voice of the snake charmer. "He has taken the gentleman's steak. He must put it right back."

"Oh, no, he mustn't," cried Mr. Owen with all possible haste. "Kim can have the steak. He's entirely welcome to it. In fact, I'd buy Kim a cow if he'd keep away from me."

A sudden burst of clapping startled his eyes wide open. Satin and the partners were also looking about with expressions of consternation. Mistaking the events taking place at the table for a public exhibition, the public had responded as only the public can. The party was surrounded by a wall of peering faces. Mr. Owen felt sorely tempted to hide his head once more beneath his napkin.

"Honor," he said to the girl, "will you hold a glass of wine to my lips? My hand is shaking like a shuttle."

As Mr. Owen was drinking his wine, a little boy pointed an unclean finger at him.

"Mom," shrilled the little boy, "that must be the Bloodless Man. Take a look at his face. There ain't nothing in it."

"Guess you're right," agreed Mom. "And look at the other

little feller." Here Mom indicated Mr. Dinner. "He's what they call a midget," Mom explained, "and I guess the other one's a jint. They always look so stupid, them jints."

The Major looked at Mr. Dinner, and Mr. Dinner looked at the Major, then both of them looked at Mr. Owen. Across the table Mr. Larkin sat convulsed. Tears were streaming down his face.

"Oh, God," he howled, "to think I have such peculiar partners."

His voice broke on a high contralto note.

"What's wrong with that guy?" a spectator wanted to know.

"I guess he's what they call a half-and-half," somebody suggested. "A weird sort of freak, he is."

"What's a half-and-half?" Mr. Larkin quickly asked Satin, his laughter stricken mute on his lips.

"I don't know," she told him, "but it must be pretty awful. Whatever it is, you're it."

Mr. Larkin looked dismayed, and for the first time in years, it seemed to him, Mr. Owen grinned maliciously.

"Go on, lady," a coarse voice called out. "Give us a bit of the kooch."

All four partners raised their heads at this insulting request. Without a word they rose from the table, singled out the speaker—a large, bull-faced individual—and knocked a hole through the crowd with him. Through this hole passed Satin. When the man was ready to rise she kicked him with brutal directness. The gross object doubled up in pain.

"I owed that to my sex," she explained to the partners as they walked towards the place where the bears lived, "as well as to my self-esteem." Then she added irrelevantly, "I can do the kooch."

"A highly successful luncheon," said Mr. Owen tonelessly. "Not a scrap of food passed my lips."

"The contortionists and the charmer seemed to enjoy it," remarked the senior partner, making an effort to gleam comfort from something.

This unfortunate remark almost did for the Bloodless Man.

Raising his clenched hands to heaven he confronted the senior partner, who stood regarding him with innocent interest. Sighing deeply, Mr. Owen let his hands fall to his sides. What was the use? He might as well strike an idiot child. The man knew no better.

"Holiday," he muttered. "A good time was had by all."

"Show him some bears," said Mr. Larkin to Major Barney. "He's all unstrung. Bears go very well when one is all unstrung."

They found the bear trainer of sterling character, and they found him exceedingly drunk. He too seemed to be unstrung. He declared himself to be bored to tears by bears.

"It's bears, bears, bears," wailed the man, "morning, noon, and night. Great shaggy beasts. Loafers. They get treated better than I do."

"May we look at some of your better class of bears?" asked the senior partner humbly.

"You may look at the whole damn lot," the trainer replied, fumbling with a locked gate. "Not out there where all those people are, but in here where you can get a better view."

With childlike confidence the partners followed the trainer and Satin through the barred gate, which locked itself behind them. The keeper, apparently losing interest, wandered off somewhere on his own affairs. The partners looked at a huge rock and beheld more bears than they had ever seen before or cared to see again. The bears in turn looked disagreeably down on Satin and the partners. Thus matters stood for a moment; then suddenly the air became charged with electricity.

"There's nothing," said Mr. Larkin vaguely. "Just nothing —nothing at all between us and all those bears."

"What!" cried Major Barney. "Has that drunken sot locked us in with his vile beasts?"

Mr. Dinner tried the gate. It stoutly refused to open.

"He has," he announced with the utmost simplicity. "They won't get much off me. What little there was left I've lost during this day of giddy pleasure."

"Dear considerate God," murmured Mr. Larkin piously. "He

might as well have let us drown if we're going to be consumed by those shaggy monsters."

"It's a holiday," observed Mr. Owen. "A feast day for the bears."

"Didn't the early martyrs do something in the line of song?" Satin asked coolly. "Who can dig up a snatch of a hymn? My business is pornography."

"You can't very well tell an infuriated bear a dirty story," observed Mr. Larkin. "And as for those early martyrs, I don't know how they did it. Why, I can't even shout for that drunken trainer, much less sing a hymn."

Apparently the bears had grown weary of watching this huddled conference. Behind their mighty leader they came lumbering down from the rocks. On the outside of the enclosure women were screaming frantically above the hoarse shouts of men. Looking decidedly sloppy, the bears lurched forward.

"Aren't they untidy in their appearance?" observed Mr. Larkin.

"All except their teeth," replied Mr. Owen. "They seem to be in perfect order."

Major Barney lighted a cigarette, then tossed the match aside.

"We should stick closer to business," he remarked. "All this gadding about doesn't get us anywhere."

"It has now," replied Mr. Larkin. "Don't be silly, my dear chap. It's got us in a terrible place, and it's going to get us into a worse one—inside those bears, you know."

Satin pressed Mr. Owen's arm as the bears came on. When she looked up at his thin, unremarkable face she did not feel afraid. She could see no sign of fear written on his features. He looked like a man who had been annoyed beyond endurance. And that was exactly how Mr. Owen felt as he stood there eyeing the bears with cynical animosity. To him they were not so much bears as fresh sources of irritation. And then an amazing thing happened—something that made the spectators gasp and the partners rub their eyes. Mr. Owen completely lost his temper, also his poise.

"I'm sick and tired of all this," he exclaimed. "You all wait here. I'll be back in half a moment."

He took a few rapid strides forward, filling the air with sizzling obscenities, and with the heavy end of his walking stick struck the horrified leader a vicious blow across his nose. The great beast uttered a gasp of dismay and sat down stupidly. His followers did likewise. They had never heard of such a thing. Were they not bears? Certainly. This madman did not seem to realize it. Blow after blow from the heavy stick descended upon the unfortunate beast. Mr. Owen's temper was far out of control.

"Heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Larkin. "My heart actually bleeds for that poor animal I disliked so greatly only a few minutes ago."

"I hope he gets his temper back," said Mr. Dinner, "after he polishes off that bear. If he doesn't, he'll disjoint us on our feet."

With squeals of pain and anguish the stricken leader turned and lumbered off in the direction of his less enterprising associates. It was at this point that Mr. Owen really outdid himself. In the bitterness of his heart he made a dive after the retreating animal and seized him by one of his hind legs. This he proceeded to bite with the utmost ferocity. It is difficult to say whether the bear was more pained than surprised. He cast one frightened glance over his shoulder, made a pitiful noise deep in his throat, then fell swooning to the rock, his paws pressed against his eyes. At this stage of the game the drunken keeper came staggering up to Mr. Owen.

"You've got to stop knocking my bear about," said the man of sterling character, smelling heavily of gin. "No more of this. Come away from that bear's leg."

Mr. Owen came away and attached himself to the trainer's ear. Picking up his discarded stick, he dragged the drunkard to the gate.

"Open it," said Mr. Owen, and the man obeyed as well as his fumbling hands would permit.

The partners, following Satin, passed through the gate with dignity and aplomb—as usual. Mr. Owen came last. The gate

closed behind him. People were cheering on all sides, running from all directions. Mr. Owen, his good temper completely restored, turned to Mr. Larkin.

"Do you drink?" he asked the senior partner.

"Well, if I didn't I'd be afraid to say no to you," said Mr. Larkin, "but it just so happens I do."

"How did that bear taste?" asked Satin, slipping her arm through Mr. Owen's.

"Execrable," he told her. "Far, far from pungent."

"You should gargle with champagne," suggested the Major.

"We all should," put in the senior partner. "Facing a flock of infuriated bears is no way to spend a holiday. No way at all. I suggest we find comfortable chairs and refuse to be lured out of them. I'm veering more than that scenic railway. We'd have been dead twice over had not the lion-hearted Owen been along to save our lives. Too bad about that bear, though. The old boy actually fainted. Fancy that—a bear."

The senior partner's sudden burst of loquacity expressed the depth of his relief at having escaped from the place of the bears. Mr. Owen regarded him with mild affection. Perhaps after so much sound and fury the party might settle down now in some relatively quiet spot and keep itself out of trouble. And seemingly this is exactly what the party did for some few hours, but it could not be expected to keep out of trouble forever. Late in the evening, more or less wall-eyed from over-indulgence, its members found themselves ranged before nothing less than a preserved whale lying at full length on a huge six-wheeled trailer. The owner of this preserved whale was sitting by it on a box. His attitude was one of listlessness and dejection.

"Dear, dear me," observed Mr. Larkin, balancing himself on his stick. "Yards and yards of sheer fish. My eyes swirl in their sockets."

"It's a whale," muttered Mr. Dinner. "A whale in the flesh."

"Is it, now?" exclaimed Mr. Larkin; then, addressing himself to the dejected-looking owner, "That's a very nice whale you have there, my friend."

The man looked up with a spark of hope in his eyes.

"Thank you," he said politely in behalf of his whale, "but you people are the only ones who have looked at her today. Something's wrong with this town. It doesn't seem to be whale-minded. I'm actually starving here alongside of my whale."

"Can't you eat a bit of the whale?" suggested Mr. Owen. "With so much whale about, no one would ever miss a bite here and there."

"I couldn't touch Minnie," retorted the owner. "We've been together for years."

"Under the circumstances," observed Satin, "I wouldn't eat a morsel of Minnie myself."

"Minnie," murmured the fascinated senior partner. "How chic. How very, very chic. It takes a man of vast daring to call a whale Minnie."

"She's a good whale, Minnie," said the man with morbid pride.

"Do you mean, a virtuous whale?" inquired Mr. Larkin.

"She hasn't had a chance," replied the owner of the whale. "She's preserved."

"Poor, poor Minnie," contributed Miss Honor Knightly with sincere emotion.

The partners turned and seriously considered that young lady. She met their gaze with large, innocent eyes. Mr. Owen looked at his partners, then shrugged eloquently. They turned back to the whale.

"She's a sperm," the man told them.

"Huh?" said Mr. Dinner. "I thought she was a whale."

"She's a sperm whale," wearily replied the man.

"I see, I see," said the senior partner. "How exceptionally nice." He turned to his companions. "She's a sperm, is Minnie," he told them. "A sperm whale, no less."

"And to think that she once sported in the ocean round her mammy," murmured Mr. Dinner with a surprising burst of sentiment.

Mr. Larkin turned and looked deep into the eyes of his small partner.

"Mammy?" said Mr. Larkin with a rising inflection.

"Yes," answered Mr. Dinner innocently. "Mother, you know."

"Yes, I know," pursued Mr. Larkin. "But this isn't a negroid whale. From the way you talk you'd think she had been born and bred in the cotton belt. Don't get silly about her. You must have been thinking of a black fish."

"All right," said Mr. Dinner. "Don't go on about it. I was merely thinking."

"Don't," the senior partner warned him. "It might throw you off entirely. Just be yourself." He turned back to the owner. "Now, about this whale," continued Mr. Larkin. "You were saying?"

"I was saying she was a good whale," the man replied. "One of the best in the country."

"Have whales taken up living in the country?" broke in the irrepressible Mr. Dinner. "I thought they lived in the sea."

"This sort of whales don't," said the man. "This is a preserved whale."

"Odd they don't come in tins," remarked Mr. Larkin. "Or in jars. However——"

"My heart is fair breaking," interrupted the man. "I'm afraid they're going to attach Minnie. Nobody pays to look at her, and I can't meet my bills."

"It would be awful to let a whale fall into the hands of strangers," observed Mr. Larkin in a serious voice. "Nothing less than a tragedy."

"How much would you want for this whale?" asked Major Barney. "We would give her a good home. She'd be among friends—people of education and refinement."

"You don't know any such yourself," put in Mr. Dinner.

"And I suppose you do," snapped the Major.

"No, thank God," the little man replied.

The owner of Minnie pondered several minutes, then mentioned a price.

"That's a lot of money for a mere fish," said Mr. Larkin.

"That's a lot of fish," the man replied, measuring the huge body with his eye.

"Come over here to this table and sit down," suggested the

Major, indicating a near-by refreshment hall. "One doesn't purchase a whale every day in the week. The occasion demands a little thoughtful drinking."

Eventually, after much give and take, the ownership of Minnie passed from the dejected man—now no longer dejected —to the partners. It was a joint enterprise. A truck was attached to the huge trailer and a sleepy driver provided. The partners and Satin swarmed somewhat unsteadily into the body of the truck. After taking an affectionate farewell of the whale's erstwhile owner, the truck and trailer moved majestically through the broad gates of the amusement park. They had hardly proceeded a block before they were stopped by an outraged policeman.

"What are you doing with that great fish all over our streets?" he demanded.

"Nothing at all, officer," Mr. Larkin called out cheerily. "Nothing at all. Merely taking Minnie home to bed. It's a late hour for whales. Proceed, driver, proceed."

The policeman was baffled. He had no precedent for the regulation of whales. The last thing the partners saw of him he was standing in the middle of the avenue, diligently scratching his head as it has been ordained that men should scratch when subjected to intolerable mental strain.

Chapter XIX. Dawn Breaks on Minnie

"WHAT ON EARTH ARE WE EVER GOING TO DO WITH THIS whale?" Mr. Larkin asked a shade nervously as the truck rolled along through the streets of the slumbering city.

"Search me," replied Mr. Dinner. "What on earth does one do with whales? I never had a whale."

"I never owned even part of a whale," put in Major Barney. "I'm too astonished to think."

"Imagine," said Mr. Larkin. "Just imagine. Here we've gone and saddled ourselves with a whale—life is difficult enough as it is, without the added complications of a whale."

"If," observed Mr. Owen thoughtfully, "if forty-eight hours ago my closest friend should have assured me I was going to own one fourth of a preserved whale, I would have laughed at him tolerantly and invented a pretext to shamble away."

"Life is so full of queer little twists," said the senior partner, gazing moodily back at the partly opened mouth of Minnie. "Our whale," he murmured. "Think of it. All that fish."

"I never owned so much of anything before," commented Mr. Owen. "Too bad it has to be whale."

"The question still remains," quoth Mr. Larkin. "What disposition are we going to make of the body and person of this female sperm whale, Minnie? We can't dedicate our lives to her."

"No," agreed Mr. Dinner. "A flock of merchant princes can't very well serve as nursemaids to a whale."

"Why not put her in dead storage?" suggested Honor Knightly.

"How?" asked the senior partner.

"Why not take Minnie to a garage," explained the girl, "and put her in dead storage."

"She belongs in dead storage," Mr. Owen contributed. "Properly speaking, the whale should be buried."

"With full honors," said Major Barney.

"Couldn't we give Minnie to someone?" asked Mr. Dinner. "Someone wanting a whale."

"Who wants a whale?" demanded Mr. Larkin. "One can't walk up to any Tom, Dick, and Harry and say, 'Drop round to my house this evening and I'll give you a preserved whale.' People would veer off. They wouldn't come. They'd try to be polite about it, but they'd invent some excuse. 'You're so generous,' they'd probably say, 'but we're not quite fixed for a preserved whale. We have no shut-off room.' "

"I hate to admit it," declared the Major, "but already I'm sick of the very sight of Minnie."

"So am I," agreed Mr. Dinner.

"Driver!" cried the senior partner. "We're sick of this sperm whale. Drive to the nearest garage."

The driver obeyed, and Mr. Larkin descended from the truck. He approached the garage, hesitated, and came back. He wanted Miss Honor Knightly to accompany him. A woman, especially a pretty woman, might succeed in obtaining a haven for the whale where a mere man would fail. They found the garage in darkness, its doors closed. Mr. Larkin applied a finger to the night bell until a man appeared who looked upon the late callers with no show of favor.

"Good-evening," began Honor Knightly winningly. "Will you take our whale into your garage?"

"No, I won't take your whale into my garage," the man snapped back in a disagreeable imitation of Satin's dulcet tones.

Mr. Larkin laughed as if he knew perfectly well the man did not mean a word he said.

"We have the whale with us," he told the man. "Perhaps if you looked her over you might take a fancy to the poor beast. Name of Minnie."

"Mean ter say," grated the man, "you want me to turn my garage into a bloomin' aquarium?"

"Not at all," replied Mr. Larkin. "This whale is quite dead. It's preserved, or embalmed, or something."

"I see," said the man nastily. "You want to make my place a mortuary for dead fish."

Satin felt that she had listened to just about enough of this sort of thing.

"Do you want that whale or don't you?" she demanded. "Answer yes or no."

"Don't fly out at the man," interposed Mr. Larkin. "After all, it's his privilege not to want a whale."

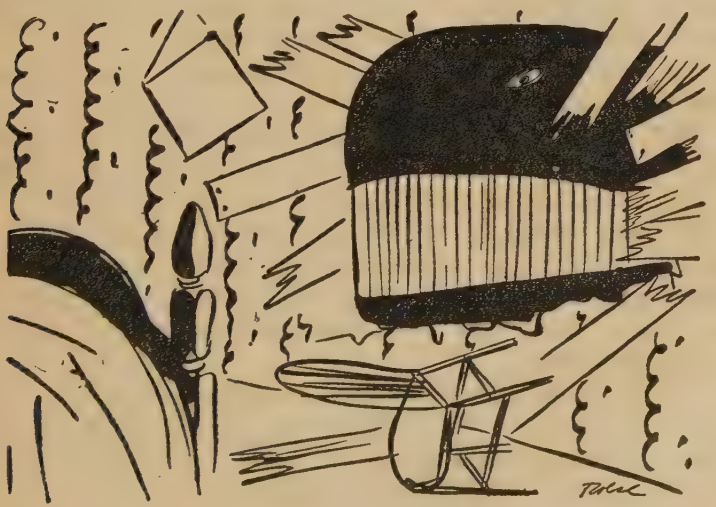
"How do I know whether I want a whale or not?" the man asked petulantly. "It's not a thing you can decide offhand. I've never thought about whales, and it's no time of night to begin thinking about them now." The man turned on his heel and walked back to the door of the garage. "Besides," he said surprisingly, "you've been drinking. Like father like son."

He disappeared.

"Now what did he mean by that?" asked Satin. "I can't be a father."

"I can," admitted Mr. Larkin. "Most disastrously, I can. But I don't quite see where his remark fits in. The man must have been somewhat mad from the loss of sleep."

Once more they climbed into the truck and started off down the boulevard.



"Wouldn't the man take the whale?" asked the Major.

"No," replied Mr. Larkin. "The man didn't want a whale."

"Isn't there any place in our great social organization for a preserved whale?" Mr. Dinner demanded. "Surely one would think it would fit in somewhere."

"A whale out of water is a square peg," observed Mr. Owen. "It's not unlike a bull in a china shop."

At this moment an individual came staggering out of the shadows. Unsteadily he attached himself to the rear of the truck and wobbled along after it. With his free hand he made mysterious gestures over his shoulder. Obviously the man had been drinking. Mr. Larkin bent down to hear him.

"You're being followed," whispered the man, pointing over his shoulder. "Pursued."

"What?" demanded the senior partner.

"You're being followed," whispered the man once more. "A great beast is stalking you on no legs at all."

"Oh," said Mr. Larkin, "I see. That isn't a beast. That's a whale."

"Worse and worse," the drunkard hurried on in a low voice. "It might be Moby Dick, and you wouldn't like that."

"Don't worry, old chap," replied Mr. Larkin, patting the man on the shoulder. "That whale's name is Minnie. You wouldn't like to take her home by any chance?"

The man looked bleakly over his shoulder into the half-open mouth of the whale.

"God, no!" he muttered. "I don't think I'll take up whales, but I've tried everything else. Forgive me if I stop off to catch a drink. The sight of that monster is driving me sober."

The man veered off and disappeared into a near-by café. The truck and trailer with its amazing burden continued their stately progress down the street. When they came abreast of Mr. Owen's hotel they were once more halted, this time by another policeman.

"What you got there?" the policeman demanded.

"Only a bit of a fish, officer," Mr. Larkin told him. "A whale, you know. It's a sperm."

"Is it stuffed?" demanded the officer.

"What bearing has that on the question?" inquired the senior partner. "As a matter of fact, it is stuffed, or preserved, or pickled. You know how whales are."

The officer's eyes were popping out of his head. He had removed his hat and was diligently mopping his brow.

"This is the damnedest thing I ever saw," he declared at last. "You should have better sense than to go knocking about the streets with a mighty creature like that at this time of night. I've a good mind to run you in."

"Whale and all, officer?" Satin sweetly inquired.

The officer was stumped.

"No," he reflected. "The chief would never be the same. He's a nervous wreck as it is. The sight of that horrid creature would drive him mad. But, just the same, you've got to do something about that whale."

"What do you do with whales?" asked Mr. Owen, thrusting his head from the truck.

"Damned if I know," replied the officer. "I never had to do with a whale before, but if you don't get this one off the streets I'll have to run you in."

"Listen, officer," said Satin persuasively. "Can't a lady buy a bit of fish in this town? You can't eat meat all the time."

An expression of revulsion took possession of the officer's face.

"You're not going to eat that thing?" he got out in a strained voice. "God, lady, don't tell me that!"

"Why not?" replied Honor Knightly. "It's merely an overgrown bloater."

"Then, will you go away somewhere else," the policeman pleaded, "and eat it by yourself? I can't bear the thought."

"Very well," the girl replied. "An occasional chunk of whale never did anyone any harm. Drive on, driver."

The policeman gulped as the truck got under way. For half an hour or more they drove undecidedly through the streets, the whale following after. Honor and her companions had seated themselves on the floor of the truck. They were weary and discouraged. Life to them seemed to consist entirely of whale. Far away in the east the sun was beginning to do things

about a new day. Five pairs of moody eyes were fixed on the flanks of Minnie. They tried to avoid the mouth as much as possible.

"I can't imagine whatever possessed us to purchase that whale," observed the senior partner. "Had it been a goldfish it would have been different. But of all things, a whale."

"I know a red-headed man who bought a circus once," contributed Mr. Dinner. "He was drunk, too."

"Don't tell us about it," said the Major. "Haven't we enough troubles of our own?"

Suddenly Mr. Larkin rose with an air of determination and called to the driver to stop. Bidding Mr. Owen to accompany him, he descended from the truck.

"What are you going to do?" asked Satin.

"I'm going up to that house," replied Mr. Larkin, pointing to a modest dwelling set back on a lawn, "and ask if they want a whale."

"Nobody wants a whale at this hour of the night, or rather, morning," declared Mr. Dinner.

"Nevertheless, I'm going to ask," replied the senior partner. "Some people will say yes to anything if you let them go back to bed."

Followed by Mr. Owen, the senior partner approached the house and rang the bell resoundingly. Presently a man appeared to them with an expression of great annoyance on his face.

"Good-evening," said Mr. Owen easily. "We thought that perhaps you might like a whale."

"It's a sperm," added Mr. Larkin.

"What would I want a whale for?" asked the man in a harsh voice.

"We don't know," came the hopeless voice of the senior partner. "What do people want whales for, anyway? They must be good for something."

"A whale is good for nothing," growled the man.

"Hen!" called a woman's voice from the darkness of the hall. "What do those men want?"

"I can't make out," replied Hen over his shoulder. "One of them seems to want to give me a whale."

"Tell them we don't want a whale," came the woman's voice meditatively. "We already have a canary."

"Madam," called Mr. Larkin. "Why not have a whale and a canary, too? They don't clash, you know."

"What do you say, Father?" said the slow voice of the hidden speaker. "Do you think we should have a whale?"

"It would make an imposing lawn decoration," put in Mr. Owen.

"Say, mister," called the woman. "Do whales eat grass?"

"She wants to know if whales eat grass," said Mr. Larkin to his partner in a low, nervous voice. "I haven't the vaguest idea what the horrible creatures eat. You tell her something, like a good fellow."

"Not this one, madam," replied Mr. Owen. "This whale has been preserved."

"I do very well with peaches," the voice of the woman informed them, "but I'd hate to try a whale. I don't think we would like a preserved whale, Father, do you?"

"I'd hate one," he replied. "I'm dead set against that whale, Mother. You've enough things to dust off already."

"Guess you're right, Hen," replied the woman. "Dusting all day long. Just tell the gentlemen we're not fixed for whales and shut the door. It's draughty in the hall."

"We're not fixed for whales," said Hen, and slammed the door in the partners' faces.

"Who is?" asked Mr. Owen bluntly, scanning the closed door.

"We're not," said Mr. Larkin. "Offhand, I can't think of anyone who is fixed for whales. That's just the trouble. Whales are so unexpected."

They returned to the truck and bade the driver to move on. In one corner Mr. Dinner, his small body curled like a dog's, was sleeping gently. The Major was nodding, his back against the side of the truck. Mr. Owen sat down, and Satin put her head on his knee. She looked up at him dreamily out of her great, deep eyes; then lashes slowly fringed them.

"I don't care where I am," she murmured, "as long as I'm with you."

After that effort she slept. Mr. Owen gazed down at the girl's face and felt himself compensated for the presence of the whale. Then he raised his eyes and gazed at the whale's face. It was remarkable, he reflected, how different faces could be. He wondered who thought them up. He glanced at Mr. Larkin. That gentleman was standing with arms folded across his chest. About him hung the brooding dignity of Napoleon.

"If I don't get rid of that whale soon," he said, "I think I'll go mad and fling myself upon it the way you did to that bear."

"That's an idea, too," remarked Mr. Owen. "We might have to dismantle Minnie. Take her apart rib by rib."

"It would be better to blow her up," commented Mr. Larkin. "More fun."

The truck was now rolling along through the spreading dawn. They were in open country with the sea only a mile or so away. Through the fresh morning air, birds flew down to look at Minnie. Some of the more daring perched upon the whale and made up songs about her. The road was steadily winding upward. An unusually enterprising farmer, his small truck laden with vegetables, tried to pass, then thought better of it. Throwing his gears into reverse he backed through a fence with the utmost expedition. With his eyes still riveted to the great fish on the trailer, he continued on backward down the field. The last glimpse they caught of him he was crashing through a corn field in the direction of a small forest.

"Probably," observed Mr. Owen, "that man will never get up early again for the remainder of his days."

"He certainly didn't want a whale," replied the senior partner. "I can understand that, though. It must be frightfully discouraging to see so much of anything at this time of day."

A man with a hoe hailed them from the roadside.

"Hi, mister," he called, "what you got there?"

"A very nice whale," Mr. Larkin told him, a spark of hope in his voice. "Would you like it?"

"Nope," replied the man. "I don't hold with whales, but it sure is a dandy. It's a big whale, ain't it?"

"Whales are big," said Mr. Larkin wearily.

"Yes," agreed the farmer cheerfully. "Seems like they run

to flesh. Well, so long. I've got some pertaters to hoe for Mrs. Mumpford. This is her farm. I only work here."

"It's amazing how much personal information one can pick up," observed the senior partner, "when one really doesn't want it."

"You know," replied Mr. Owen, "if we didn't want to give this whale away, if we had our hearts set on this whale, people would beg us for it with tears in their eyes."

"Perhaps you're right," commented Mr. Larkin, "but I'm so fed up with that whale I'd cross the street to avoid her."

Gradually they approached the sea. The road was now sloping steeply. Less than a quarter of a mile away a white beach lay gleaming beneath the slanting sun. Suddenly Mr. Larkin clutched his partner's arm.

"I have it!" he cried. "I have it! We'll launch this infernal whale back into the deep."

He shouted to the driver to stop. Everyone woke up and swarmed out of the truck. Stones were placed under the wheels of the trailer until the truck could draw out of the way. Ahead of them the road ran straight to the sea. A small wooden house was the only dwelling in sight. It stood by the roadside. There was a feeling of tenseness in the air as the partners rolled the stones away from the wheels of the trailer.

"Good-bye, Minnie," murmured Satin, and waved a crumpled handkerchief.

The trailer gathered headway and rumbled down the road. Straight to its course it held, until it came to the house. Here it swerved horrifyingly from the road and bounded forward. There was the crash of snapping timber, and Minnie's great head disappeared from view through the walls of the frail structure.

"It veered, my God, it veered!" sobbed the senior partner on Mr. Owen's chest. "Oh, what a whale! I'd like to take a stick and beat it within an inch of its life."

"What's that?" asked the voice of a sleepy woman within the wooden house.

Her husband opened his eyes, then snapped them shut with a click.

"Don't say a word," he whispered. "Perhaps it hasn't seen us."

"What hasn't?" asked the woman.

"The whale," replied the man, his head buried under his pillow.

"The whale," replied the woman. "Since when have whales taken to prowling round the countryside? Something's got to be done about all this."

"Well, don't ask me to do it," came the muffled voice of the man. "One look at that face and all ambition fades."

"Just to think of it," continued the woman. "Whales bounding about on land and visiting decent people in their beds. It's an outrage."

"It wouldn't be any less surprising," replied her husband, "if they bounded about the country and visited indecent people in their beds."

The woman opened her eyes and looked reprovingly at Minnie.

"It's a whale all right," she said at last. "A great huge whale, but the blow must have killed it. There's a glassy look in its eyes."

"That whale has nothing on me," replied her husband. "My eyes are burned out like a couple of bulbs, and it took only one good look to do it."

"To be awakened at dawn by a whale," mused the woman. "Who says that all the novelty has gone out of life?"

"You seem to take that whale with the utmost equanimity," remarked the man, nerving himself to withdraw from his place of concealment beneath the pillow. "What are we going to do with the brute? Is it going to become a member of the household? Is it going to remain in our bedroom, watching our lyings down and gettings up? I'd hate like hell to undress myself before the critical gaze of those glazed eyes."

"If we remove the whale," said the woman, "we remove one side of our little home. Our bedroom stands disclosed to the world. The general public will be able to bear witness to our habits."

"That would be almost preferable to the scrutiny of that monster of the deep," observed the man.

"We could hang a sheet over its face," suggested his wife.

"Two sheets," amplified the husband. "One on either side."

"There's another thing to be said in favor of that whale," went on the lady on the bed. "It will effectively keep from the house our old and rare relations."

"I wish we could have Uncle Alfred down here and show him to that horrible head," the man advanced suggestively. "One look, I think, would do the trick. His heart isn't strong. We'd be on easy street then."

"And it wouldn't quite be murder," added the woman. "Not quite."

"Exactly," agreed the husband. "All the old boy needs is a bit of a shove. The whale would do the trick."

"One man's whale is another man's poison," observed the woman, yawning daintily. "The wonder of it all, if not the beauty."

"I fear we won't sleep very soundly under the prow of that monster," remarked the husband. "Our dreams won't be so fragrant."

"No," replied the woman. "I must confess I hardly admire the perfume it is using."

"I dare say," her husband remarked, turning over on his side, "that one grows accustomed to almost anything in time."

From the crest of a distant hill came the chanting of several voices. It was the triumphal song of the partners, reinforced by Satin. Farmers in the field paused at their honest labors as the truck rolled along in the direction of the town.

"You must all dine at my house tonight," Mr. Larkin was saying in his great-hearted manner. "We want you to meet our wives."

"Didn't know you had wives," replied Mr. Owen. "You act less married than any men I ever knew."

"Isn't it awful?" agreed the senior partner in a voice touched with sorrow. "From one excess to another—bounding always. The truth is, we're miserable with our wives. How glad we

would be to change them. You see, they don't understand us, especially when we relax."

"With a crash," added Mr. Owen.

The senior partner endeavored to look pained.

Chapter XX. Too Many Wives in a Bed

THAT SAME EVENING AT NINE SATIN AND HECTOR OWEN HAD the somewhat dubious pleasure of meeting the wives of the partners. Mr. Larkin's town house stood in a side street only a few yards removed from one of the main thoroughfares of the city. It was difficult to distinguish it from the neighborhood cafés, the senior partner having conceived the quaint idea of placing tables before his front door and shielding them from the sun with parasols of startling floridity. A waiter stood in attendance. The same festive atmosphere was maintained within the house itself, the dining room having all the earmarks of a first-class barroom.

In the hall a check girl was waiting to relieve the callers of anything with which they cared to part. She gave Mr. Owen

a check and an after-hours smile. He felt at home immediately.

The reception room was wildly luxurious. It gave the impression of veering like its owner. In it awaited the wives. The introductions were almost touchingly simple.

"This is Nana," said Mr. Larkin, indicating a small, dark woman of middle years with youthfully wicked eyes.

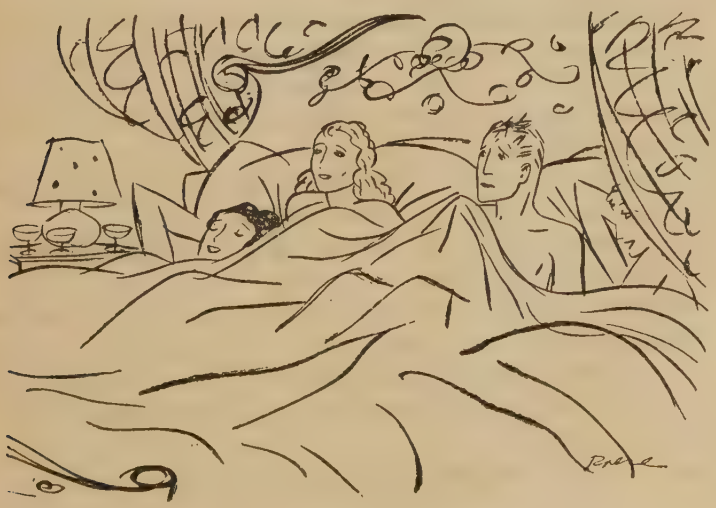
"Shall I kiss him on the lips," asked Nana, removing a cocktail glass from hers, "or shake him by the hand?"

"Why not bite him on the ear?" suggested Mr. Larkin.

Nana looked for a moment into Satin's glittering eyes. One look was sufficient. She shook Mr. Owen's hand.

Dinner's wife was tall and rawboned in a good-looking way. Although no longer in her first blooming, she was still in full possession of her sex and wore her blonde dye recklessly. She was referred to as the Kitten, for no reasonable reason at all. The Major's source of dissatisfaction was undeniably plump. Snow-white hair fell round a pink, youthful face. There were dimples in the face. Her name was Aggie, and like Nana and the Kitten, she too, was a little drunk. The partners were surprisingly sober, a social error they made haste to rectify.

The party came to rest against the bar in the dining room.



It occupied one entire wall. Behind it were two red-faced, benevolent individuals with the most meticulously brushed and parted hair Mr. Owen had ever seen.

"We've been running these poor men ragged," the Kitten explained, "all day long. They're exhausted mentally as well as physically. Can't think up any more drinks. We've tried them all."

"You know," put in Nana, trying to look naïve and failing most lamentably, "we get so lonely when our husbands are away——"

"As they always are," put in Aggie.

"—that the only thing left to do is to drink like fish," Nana concluded.

"Please don't, my dear," said the senior partner hastily. "Don't mention fish in my presence. We had such an unfortunate time with a whale only last night. Stayed up with the monster till dawn. You can't imagine how troublesome a whale can be until you've actually met one."

"Good!" exclaimed Nana. "I like that better and better. One can hardly go to bed with a whale."

"But if anyone could go to bed with a whale," quoth Aggie, "those three men would be the ones."

The partners looked distressed.

"Would it be possible to veer this conversation into more savory channels?" suggested the senior partner with a delicate lift of his eyebrows. "The mere idea of going to bed with a whale makes my reason totter. Harry, triple Martini, if you please. Serve it in a stein."

"And what do you do at the store, my dear?" asked Nana, turning to Satin. "Are you a model?"

"I sell dirty books," said Satin, and Mr. Owen thanked his God she did not add, "lady."

"Marvelous," cried the Kitten. "Simply marvelous. And you go around with a lot of dirty men—our husbands."

"Come, come," put in Major Barney. "Take us off the pan for a while. There are worse husbands than we are knocking about this town."

"A depressing thought," said Aggie.

"Incredible," added Nana. "Say something, Mr. Owen. We've hardly heard your voice. Do you lech, too?"

"Do I what?" asked Mr. Owen, shrinking a little at the very sound of the word.

"What I meant was," explained Nana, "are you a lecherous man?"

"May heaven turn my toe nails blue," exploded the senior partner. "What a question to ask a guest! Do you lech? Hold me before I begin to careen all over the room."

"I wouldn't call him overly lecherous," answered Satin for the stunned Mr. Owen.

"Then you know, my dear. You've found out," said the Kitten in tones of delight. "I do hope he's promiscuous, at least. There are so few fresh faces. His is not unattractive."

The three wives looked closely into Mr. Owen's face, then nodded significantly at each other. Mr. Owen drank steadily and endeavored to appear at ease. Presently he succeeded far better than he had intended.

By the time they had finished with the bar the dinner was in even a worse condition than the diners, yet no one seemed to mind, as the courses were snapped through and set aside in favor of wine.

"He bit a bear yesterday," Mr. Larkin announced, pointing at the guest of honor, "and the bear swooned."

"If he bit me," retorted Aggie, "I think I'd swoon, too—right in his arms. Will you bite me sometime, Mr. Owen?"

"Try not to be so mollish," interposed the Major.

"And he saved our three lives," put in the small Dinner from behind a large glass. "We were drowning and he saved our lives. All three of them."

The wives looked reproachfully at Mr. Owen.

"Why did you do that?" demanded Nana. "Have you no consideration for us?"

"But my dear lady," protested Mr. Owen, "I couldn't let my partners drown right before my eyes."

"We could," said the Kitten. "We could even go so far as to help them to drown."

"Pay no attention to them, my boy," Mr. Larkin called out

from the end of the table. "Our wives have a sense of horror instead of humor. If you want to make a hit with them, although I can't understand why you should, just take them to the morgue for an outing. They'd love it dearly." He glanced at his watch, and uttered an exclamation. "What do we do with time?" he said. "It's eleven o'clock already."

"We tossed time over the bar in great handfuls," his wife told him, "and besides, we didn't begin operations until well after nine o'clock."

"I must get in touch with the Mayor," continued Mr. Larkin. "Something has just occurred to me. Owen, I loathe policemen. They're always under one's feet. I feel so splendidly now I'd like to assault a cop."

"It's been a dream of mine," replied Mr. Owen, "a beautiful dream unfulfilled."

"Well," said the senior partner, "it's become a mania with me. Therefore, I suggest that by way of entertainment we indulge in a little concentrated cop baiting. The Mayor is my brother-in-law. He is putty in my hands as well as in those of his bosses. I must make some arrangements with him for the protection of our various bodies and persons."

"It would do me a lot of good to bash a cop in the eye," Mr. Dinner declared as the senior partner left the room to arrange things with the Mayor.

"It would do the cop no harm," his wife replied. "You're such a little man."

"And it would do me even more good," the little man went on dispassionately, "to bash you in the eye."

"Is that so," replied Mrs. Dinner. "I'd have to sit on the floor, my midget, to give you a chance."

Mr. Dinner's bitter retort was interrupted by the slightly swaying entrance of the senior partner.

"It's all arranged," he announced. "Larry, the Mayor's secretary, is going to sit by the wire. We will be permanently connected.

"What did you tell his honor?" inquired Major Barney.

"Merely that we were going to have a bit of a lark," replied Mr. Larkin, "and we didn't want any police interference. Larry

has been instructed to take care of that side of the business. All we have to do is to assault or insult an officer, then run like hell to this house. You see, we must lure them in." He paused and thought deeply for a moment, then addressed himself to his wife. "Nana," he said, "as I remember it, you have somewhere about the house a sort of a heavily stuffed leather bar we foisted off on the women of this city under the guise of a flesh-reducing device. Will you get it? While not being exactly lethal, it will make a decidedly effective weapon."

The senior partner, with all the solemnity of a chief of staff giving instructions for an approaching engagement, turned to Major Barney. "Major Britt-Britt," he began, "on our first sortie from the house you are to remain behind and close to the door. When we lure a policeman in, you whack him with the leather bar with the object in view of reducing his flesh to atoms."

Nana, who had left the room, returned with a long, felt-packed leather bar. The Major took it and swished it through the air. Then he smiled a trifle grimly and sat down, looking infinitely pleased. It was going to be a good evening.

Then began one of the maddest and most undignified adventures in which either Mr. Owen or his partners had yet taken part. It was reprehensible in every detail, in conception as well as in execution, and yet like so many reprehensible exploits it was entirely and most satisfyingly successful. It was not that these thuggish gentlemen had any personal score to settle with the minions of the law, but merely that as private citizens they felt it only fair that they should get their innings once. And in extenuation of their conduct it must be borne in mind they were still suffering from the effects of the previous night as well as from an overdose of Minnie, the female sperm whale.

Leaving the Major at the front door, Mr. Larkin led his two partners from the house. They looked about at once for a policeman. Unfortunately for him one was standing on the corner. As Mr. Larkin approached the officer he, the senior partner, thought of the lowest and most objectionable word he could fling in the man's face. When he found this word

Mr. Larkin shivered a little himself and wondered if he could get it out.

"Can you pretend to laugh?" asked Mr. Larkin of his partners in a low voice. "Irritatingly. You know—tauntingly?"

"I'll be able to make some sort of offensive noise," replied Mr. Owen, "although I still find myself a trifle awed by the majesty of the law."

"You must both wait until I've done my stuff," continued the senior partner, "then, like a Greek chorus, you're to come in with peals of taunting laughter. After that we must run like hell."

"That part I will play to perfection," Mr. Dinner muttered.

Walking snappily and with every indication of purpose, the three men swung up to the unsuspecting policeman and confronted him.

"Officer," said Mr. Larkin in a businesslike voice, "are you listening?"

"No," snapped the officer. "Whatta you want?"

"Officer," continued the senior partner quite distinctly, "listen well. Officer, you're a punk, and I'm going to tweak your repellent nose."

Before the policeman could recover his stunned faculties Mr. Larkin's hand shot out and affixed itself to the man's nose which he proceeded to tweak with both skill and vigor.

"Laugh," murmured Mr. Larkin to his partners. "Tauntingly."

Weird noises issued from the throats of Messrs. Owen and Dinner. They sounded more terrified than taunting, yet they served one purpose. They brought the assaulted policeman back to life and fury with a snap.

"You're a low punk, officer," Mr. Larkin assured the appalled policeman in his rather precious accents. "Try to paddle those great flat feet."

It is needless to say that the policeman did try. He tried his level best. Down the street he pounded after the flying heels of the partners. At the door of the house they paused and looked back. The officer was close at hand.

"Here we are, low punk of a policeman," called the senior

partner, then ducked into the house, his companions close behind him.

"Be ready, Major!" Mr. Larkin cried, darting for the telephone. "The blow is intended to outrage more than it is to maim."

The officer did not hesitate until the resounding whack from the stuffed leather bar brought him to a full stop. As the weapon struck him across the stomach he exhaled vastly great quantities of air, then sat down on the floor. His face was working furiously, while inarticulate sounds issued from between his lips. Presently, as he pulled himself together, these sounds formed themselves into words.

"A punk, am I?" he was heard to mutter. "Holy Saint Patrick preserve us, they'll never get over this. Never. I'll tear them all to pieces. I'll torture them for years."

Mr. Dinner glanced at Mr. Owen and discovered that he too was taking the policeman's words very much to heart. By the telephone Mr. Larkin was calmly sitting, the receiver in his hand. Slowly the officer rose from the floor and advanced into the room, his eyes alight with the fires of madness. Before he could bellow his rage, the senior partner addressed him in a voice of authority.

"Officer," he said, "you're wanted on the telephone. The Mayor's office speaking."

The officer paused and glared at the speaker.

"If this is some more monkey business," he muttered, "I'm goinna drag your insides out by their roots."

With this dire threat he seized the telephone and applied the receiver to his ear. And as he listened the red flush of his face changed to a light green.

"Donovan speaking," he began. "I've just——"

"It doesn't matter what you've just done," came the voice at the other end of the wire. "I'm speaking for the Mayor. This is Larry. The boss says you're not to lay a finger on the four gentlemen in 33 Harvest Street. There's no harm in them."

"What!" almost screamed Donovan. "No harm in them.

They're dangerous maniacs, I tell you. Do you know what they did?"

"What did they do?" asked Larry, who liked to be entertained.

"They called me a punk," Donovan whispered into the telephone. "A low punk of a policeman. That's what they did."

"Well, aren't you?" asked Larry easily.

The officer gasped and strangled. Finally he collected his voice.

"And—and," he continued, "one of them tweaked my nose right in front of everybody. A mighty tweak, it was. And his accomplices laughed at me, very nastily they laughed. And that's not all. For Gord's sake, Larry, can't I do a thing? I'm that upset—all aquiver."

"What would you like to do?" inquired the voice at the other end of the line.

"Shoot 'em," replied Donovan without a moment's hesitation. "Shoot 'em in painful places."

"You can't do a thing," said Larry, "except to go back to your post. Hurry away now, Donovan, and don't keep me here all night."

With an expression of incredulity in his strained eyes the policeman put down the receiver, and regarded the occupants of the room. Coolly the partners returned his stare. The women looked sympathetic. Suddenly he uttered a wild scream and, springing from the chair, seized Mr. Dinner by the nose.

"Mayor or no Mayor," he grated, "you're going to stand for this."

Mr. Dinner stood for it with fortitude and calm.

"It didn't hurt at all," he announced to the interested gathering. "This punk cop hasn't the strength of a flea."

Donovan's lips were mumbling as he looked hatefully at the telephone. Then with a sound like a sob he staggered from the house and arrested the first citizen he saw on a charge of criminal loitering. From this point on Mr. Owen was scarcely in a condition to remember the remainder of the evening with any degree of clarity. The assault of Officer Donovan had moved him deeply. It had addled his brain and doubled the potency

of the drinks he had already consumed. The fact that an officer of the law could be so treated with impunity filled him with a sense of loss. It was like some great upheaval in nature—a fundamental change in the structure of the universe. His amazement temporarily outstripped his satisfaction.

After the crazed departure of the policeman the air was filled with the sounds of popping corks and general jubilation. Some time later he became hazily aware of a terrific battle taking place between the partners and their respective wives. He was impressed by the extreme bitterness and vitriolic quality of this brawl. They were reviling one another with recriminations of the most shocking nature, in the midst of which he fell asleep, his head on Satin's shoulder.

When he awoke the following morning, he was not in bed with one woman as he had expected, but with three, his partners' wives in the fullness of their rage having left their husbands more or less flat. On a day bed by the French windows through which the sun was streaming, Satin was sleeping with the confidence and grace of youth.

There are men who, upon finding themselves so well placed, grow both elated and grateful over their great good fortune—three women in bed and one in reserve. Mr. Owen was not one of these men. He was panic stricken and fearful. For one awful moment his heart stopped beating, then frantically leaped into action. He himself was unable to move, being wedged in between Nana and the plump person of Aggie. And while he was considering the situation with all its shocking implications, his consternation was further intensified by the inquiring scrutiny of three pairs of eyes.

"Look!" exclaimed Aggie. "There's a man in bed between us."

"I know it," was Nana's gloomy reply. "I don't have to be told when a man is in bed with me. He's the new partner."

"First drunkenness," came the sleepy voice of the Kitten, "and then dishonor. It always works out that way. Sordid, I call it."

"It's lucky," resumed Nana, "that this is an oversized bed. Otherwise we would have had no sleep at all."

"I don't even remember the name of this threefold seducer," the Kitten observed.

"It's Owen," replied Aggie. "Hector Owen."

"Mr. Owen," inquired Nana, "would you mind giving us a brief résumé of what has gone on in this bed?"

"I can't tell you," said Mr. Owen, a weary groan escaping his lips. "All I can say, ladies, is I'm shocked to the quick."

"To the what?" exclaimed the Kitten, her head popping up.

"Don't ask," replied Nana. "We don't care to know."

"Do you all remember anything?" asked Mr. Owen timidly. "No details, of course."

"I don't, worse luck," replied Aggie, "but I can draw my own conclusions."

"Oh-h!" exhaled Mr. Owen. "What have I done?"

"Use your imagination, my dear sir," said the Kitten from her side of the tremendous bed. "It is only too clear to me."

"But couldn't I have slept steadily through the night?" pleadingly asked the man.

"That would have been an insulting thing to do," observed Nana, "as well as foolhardy."

"Rather dishonor," said Aggie, "than such gross neglect."

The Kitten laughed shortly.

"No fear of that," she told them. "A man might neglect one woman, but he could hardly keep out of the way of the three of us, especially a man who bites bears and saves lives and deals in pornographic literature."

"And to think," murmured Nana, "I wanted to know if he leched."

Once more Mr. Owen groaned.

"Don't use that word," he pleaded. "It isn't a verb, anyway. People can't lech."

"Then how would you put it?" snapped Nana.

"I wouldn't even bring up the subject," Mr. Owen replied.

"He must have started over here," the Kitten reflected aloud, "and grimly worked his way across. I've just found one of his socks."

"Have you anything on, Mr. Owen?" asked Aggie, fumbling with the bedclothes.

"Don't!" cried Mr. Owen. "Don't look underneath. I'll find out for myself."

He ducked his head under the bedclothes, then immediately popped it out.

"Little," he said in a hoarse voice. "Very little."

"I'm amazed you made that concession," declared Nana. "How are we fixed for garments?"

"Not at all," replied Mr. Owen. "My God, ladies, this is terrible. I kept one of mine, at least."

"Meaning, we didn't?" inquired Nana.

"I'm very much afraid not," said Mr. Owen in a low voice. "There seems to be nothing as far as the eye can reach."

"What did you do with our clothes?" demanded Aggie.

"I don't know," replied Mr. Owen hopelessly. "I can't remember."

"That will sound good to the judge," put in the Kitten.

"What a man!" observed Nana. "What thoroughness and determination!"

"Come out of that bed at once," commanded Satin from across the room. "What are you doing in there with all those women?"

"Nothing, dear," replied Mr. Owen placatingly. "I'm doing nothing at all."

"Not now, he isn't," sarcastically commented Nana.

"Satin," called Mr. Owen nervously. "All I have left are my drawers."

"They're poor protection against the attack of three full grown women," said Satin with a dry laugh. "I'm surprised they left you with those."

"Don't blame us," the Kitten protested. "He didn't leave us a scrap—not a blessed shred."

A smothered ejaculation turned Mr. Owen's eyes to the door. The partners were standing in it, their eyes fixed on the bed.

"Heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Larkin. "He's slept with all our wives."

"Our partner," said Mr. Dinner. "Our dear brother in arms—in our dear wives' arms."

"But I don't understand it at all," protested the senior partner. "I asked him only to dinner, and here I find him in bed with every wife we have. Isn't that going too far?"

"Owen," said the Major sternly, "what are you doing in bed with our wives?"

"Not a thing, Major," answered Mr. Owen. "Just lying here talking."

"The chat after the storm," observed Satin.

"That's not the way to ask it," Mr. Larkin said to the Major. "Ask him what he has been doing in bed with our wives."

"That would make good listening," Satin commented lazily. "I like droll stories."

"Listen," said Mr. Owen earnestly. "This is God's own truth. I don't know how I got here, why I got here, or what I did when I did get here."

"I never thought a man could cram so many unchivalrous statements into one short, compact sentence," remarked the Kitten indignantly.

"Three fair names dishonored at one fell swoop," mused the senior partner. "It's almost like magic. You know, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he had the cook and the check girl under the bed and the maid tucked in the closet."

"A new broom sweeps clean," Honor Knightly tossed in. "I'm actually proud of the man."

"I admire him a little myself," admitted Mr. Larkin. "Such industry. Such enterprise. Such dogged perseverance. I'd like to exhibit him in a show case."

"Madam," thundered the Major, "have you dishonored my name?"

"Search me," Aggie answered. "I don't believe your name was mentioned."

"It would hardly have been in good taste under the circumstances, Major," put in Mr. Larkin. "I think she was right about that."

"Mrs. Dinner," demanded the small partner, "what have you been doing all night long?"

"Trying to get some sleep," the Kitten answered sulkily.

"My God!" exclaimed Mr. Larkin. "Was he as bad as all that?"

"Ask him," said the Kitten.

"I shrink from the very suggestion of such pell-mell activity," the senior partner declared. "This room must have been a bedlam. I'd actually wring my hands if I thought it would do any good."

"We can't stand here discussing this triple adultery all day," the Major broke in. "You three women are as good as divorced already."

"Of course," agreed Mr. Larkin. "A divorce is most necessary. We can't afford to be dishonored *en masse,* especially by the same man. Owen, my boy, do hurry up and dress yourself and you, too, Miss Knightly. People buy pornography at the most amazing hours."

"Divorce and be damned," snapped Nana. "To live with you is about the same as staying single. If your face wasn't so silly I'd forget what it looks like half the time."

"It looks just the same during the other half," Mr. Larkin assured her. "We'll wait for you downstairs, Owen. Your night's work should earn a day's repose and all that, but we can't spare a man of your unflagging energy from the store. Hurry down."

As the door closed on the partners Mr. Owen, casting modesty to the wind, lunged out of the bed and wearily began to dress. Satin did likewise. The three wives watched them with interest, and then calmly went back to sleep.

Chapter XXI. The Triple Co-respondent

THE PARTNERS SAT AT ONE TABLE, THEIR WIVES AT ANOTHER. Mr. Owen, the co-respondent, and Miss Knightly, the chief witness, occupied a smaller table between the two. Looking down on them from behind his elevated desk sat Judge Hampton, who knew nothing at all about the whys and wherefores of divorce procedure. He had been appointed to handle the case

in the absence of the official referee. The wives did not like his looks. Neither did the partners and, from the expression on Judge Hampton's face, he failed to like anyone's looks. Disgust with mankind ran eloquently through all the wrinkles of his rage-punished face. The iron-gray hair on his head seemed to bristle forward in a gesture of contempt for humanity. So light blue were his eyes that they gave the impression of being sightless. This peculiarity made the good Judge all the more disconcerting. One was never quite certain upon whom those eyes were fixed.

Never had Mr. Owen been so popular with the partners. From their table they gazed across at him with eyes overflowing with gratitude and affection. Not only had he twice saved them from extinction, but also he was now about to liberate them from their wives. In celebration of the auspicious occasion they had succeeded in getting themselves comfortably yet still competently inebriated. The pitcher on the table, supposed to contain fresh water, had been cleverly filled with gin by the crafty Mr. Dinner. In the folly of their childish confidence they had dispensed with the services of lawyers. They would conduct their own case.

Satin, motivated by some misguided impulse, had dressed herself so deeply in mourning one could only conclude she had lost an entire family. It made Mr. Owen feel partly buried merely to sit beside her.

The courtroom was packed to the rails, moral turpitude still being the greatest show on earth. Judge Hampton's head was turning in the direction of the partners. His misty eyes seemed to be weaving a curse around them.

"The air from the plaintiff's table," he said, "has an unpleasant suggestion of a barroom. It makes me blink. Charlie, turn on the fan before I begin to dance and sing." Charlie, an aged court attendant, directed the full power of an electric fan against the indignant partners. "That's better," continued the Judge, "but not, I fear, for those sitting behind them. Did not this paper tell me differently"—here the Judge raised an official looking sheet—"I would come to the conclusion that these ladies here were quite rightly endeavoring to divorce themselves from a trio of alcoholics instead of serving as defendants."

"Your honor," Mr. Larkin politely replied, "the ladies, as you inaccurately called them, have the capacity to drink this trio under the table."

"They should add another bottle," his honor retorted in a cruel voice, "and drink you under the sod."

Mr. Black, attorney for the wives, rose to his feet.

"In denying the plaintiffs' implications, your honor," said

the suave Mr. Black, "my clients wish me to remind you that no fan was needed to be turned against them."

"Back in your chair," snapped Judge Hampton sharply. "The torrents of so-called perfume deluging me from your clients' table suggests another resort of vicious amusement the name of which I will leave to your imagination. Between these two tables I find myself leading a life of vicarious depravity. Such tactics will have no effect on me save an unpleasant one."

Upon the reception of this remark, derogatory to their wives, the partners broke into a volley of spontaneous clapping.

"You will either be quiet where you are," the Judge told them, "or raving in your cells. Take your choice." He paused and frowned down at the paper on his desk, then he both shook and raised his head as if suddenly coming back to life. "I did not come here," he said, "to discuss the various odors of those before me. Suffice it to say both are thoroughly obnoxious. As I understand it, Messrs. Larkin, Dinner, and Britt-Britt charge their wives with excessive adultery and on those unsavory grounds submit a plea for a divorce."

"Quite correct, your honor," replied the senior partner. "Those three women do nothing else but."

"But what?" demanded his honor.

"You know," Mr. Larkin answered significantly. "That word you used. It began with an 'a.' "

"Do they now," murmured the Judge, a small spark of interest faintly illuminating his eyes as he fixed them on the wives. "Aren't they getting a little old for that sort of thing?"

"Your honor!" cried the Kitten, stung to a disregard of the good offices of Mr. Black. "We look ten years older with our clothes on."

"Madam," replied Judge Hampton, "are you arguing for or against yourself and your companions? As I interpret your remark you are deliberately attempting to convey to me the disgraceful information that when your clothes are off you look ten years younger. Just where does that lead?"

"Well, your honor," faltered the Kitten, "you know how women are."

"You mean with their clothes off?" interrupted the Judge.

"I mean," the Kitten struggled on, "no lady likes to be told she's too old to be otherwise, if you get what I mean."

"I do," put in the Judge. "You have just told me, and it hasn't done any of you a bit of good. Please sit down and cease from disgracing yourself." Again the Judge paused and passed a hand across his eyes. "Owing to the sudden calling of the case and the suspicious circumstances surrounding the whole sordid affair, it has been deemed expedient to have the three co-respondents in court. Will they now come forward?"

"Your honor," announced Mr. Larkin, "there is only one co-respondent."

"What!" exclaimed the Judge, his blue eyes swimming in his face. "Only one man for these three women? My word, has he no other occupation?"

"He's our partner," Mr. Larkin answered, a little proudly.

"Do you mean to say this frantic adulterer is still your partner?" the Judge demanded incredulously.

"We never confuse business with pleasure," was the senior partner's hypocritical retort. "The gentleman's name is Hector Owen, and he is one of the busiest and most progressive men in town."

"He must be," commented the Judge. "Will Mr. Owen please stand up? I can scarcely wait to see him."

The entire courtroom rose as Mr. Owen got to his feet to confront the Judge. Here was a man worth looking at—a man of solid achievement.

"Mr. Owen," began the Judge, "if what I hear about you is true you must be a very horrid man indeed. Who is that woman beside you? She's all in black. Did you happen to murder her husband?"

Before Mr. Owen could reply to these questions Satin's voice was heard.

"No, your honor," she announced devastatingly. "I'm only his mistress. I was there and saw it all."

"I had hoped not to veer," muttered the senior partner to his companions, "but that girl's candor is simply muscle binding."

Upon the reception of Satin's information the Judge's eyes seemed to die in his face. For a brief moment he gave the impression of a man withdrawn from life.

"Good God," he was heard to remark to the courtroom at large. "What an amazing character. What an unregenerate soul. He wrecks three homes, then drags his mistress into court. And although she saw it all they are still as thick as thieves."

At this point Judge Hampton clasped his hands and leaned across his desk. Mr. Owen received the uneasy impression he was being most disagreeably scrutinized. "Hector Owen," resumed his honor in a meditative voice, "you're not an especially powerful man and most certainly not a handsome one. I must confess, I don't understand how you get away with it. If this were a criminal court I'd greatly enjoy putting you away for life. As it is I can only ask you to confirm the charges, but, for God's sake, don't tell the story in what I can well imagine would be your own words. A few of us present still have a shred of decency left."

"Your honor," replied Mr. Owen, "I am happy to say I don't remember a thing."

"You are happy to say that, are you?" observed the Judge with biting sarcasm. "Well, I'd be ashamed to say it. Do you mean to tell me that you've grown so accustomed to your misconduct that it leaves no impression on your mind?"

"No, your honor," put in the helpful Mr. Larkin, "he doesn't mean that. Our partner was drunk at the time. You must forgive him. Also, he's been extremely busy selling pornographic literature."

Judge Hampton was seen to sway a little in his chair. His mouth opened and closed, but for a few moments no words issued therefrom.

"I have never," he got out with an effort, "I have never in my life encountered so disreputable a character in human form. He gets himself drunk, ruins a lot of women, and then pops off and sells dirty books to the general public. I'd prefer to deal with a poisoner. Owen," he suddenly thundered, "tell

me when and where these several incidents took place. What period of time did they cover?"

Satin was on her feet now, standing loyally by the wretched Mr. Owen.

"Your honor," she answered for him, "it all happened at the same time and at the same place. You see, the three wives were occupying the same bed and——"

"Have you by any chance mistaken this courtroom for a stag party?" interrupted the Judge. "We don't care to hear any vile stories, if you please."

"But it's true, your honor," Satin insisted. "I was there at the time."

"Cheering him on to further endeavors, I suppose," observed the Judge icily. "Why didn't you intervene? Why didn't you raise a protesting hand?"

"I couldn't even lift a finger, your honor," the girl replied, with an engaging smile. "I was as drunk as a lord myself."

Judge Hampton closed his eyes and sat like a man frozen inanimate with pain. Presently he spoke as if from a great distance.

"Merciful heavens," he told all who cared to listen, "I'll have to go into a retreat after this case is ended. Never have I been forced to hear such demoralizing testimony. There isn't a scrap of fragrance anywhere. The indecency of it all is quite unrelieved. What were all those women doing in that one bed?"

"Well, you see," replied Satin, "the ladies were drunk too—petrified."

"It only remains now for you to tell me," said the Judge in a dead voice, "that the husbands were smoking opium in a waterfront dive, and the whole vicious circle will be complete." Here he looked scornfully upon the partners. "What I want to know is, how could so many persons and so much activity be confined to a single bed?"

"It wasn't a single bed, your honor," Mr. Larkin put in. "As a matter of fact, I had that bed especially made. It's about twice the size of a double bed."

"It must be a huge bed," his honor reflected aloud, as if picturing the object in his mind's eye.

"It's a tremendous bed, your honor," enthusiastically agreed the senior partner. "There would have been ample room for you."

The Judge started in his chair as if suddenly and mortally stung.

"What would I be doing in that bed?" he gasped.

"Seeing life," quoth Mr. Dinner with startling clarity.

At this his honor seemed to be deciding whether to burst a blood vessel or to faint dead away on his desk. Finally, after a desperate mental effort, he succeeded in pulling himself together into a compact mass of venom.

"Dinner," he said, "if I had my way you'd be warmed over in hell. As it is, if you make any more remarks you'll grow cold and stale in jail." Here the Judge turned sharply upon the three wives. "Do you or do you not deny the charges of your husbands?"

"My clients cannot answer that question, your honor," replied Mr. Black, rising. "They say they do not remember."

"This," commented the Judge bitterly, "is by all odds the most forgetful series of adulteries on record."

"If you'd been in our place," said Nana defensively, "you wouldn't have remembered either, your honor."

"Madam," rasped the Judge, "you will kindly refrain from putting me in your place. I am a judge, you must remember, of long standing."

"All the more reason for lying down in bed," Nana retorted, "and getting a little rest."

"Under the circumstances," said his honor tartly, "I'm afraid there would have been little rest for me."

"Oh, your honor!" exclaimed Nana coyly. "What a thing to say!"

The Judge looked shocked.

"I didn't mean that at all," he told her.

"Mean what, your honor?" she asked sweetly.

"Never mind," retorted the Judge. "We will drop the bed and take up other things." He turned back to the partners who, for the sake of verisimilitude, had been drinking gin like water. Mr. Dinner was now snoring gently with his head resting

against the pitcher. "You gentlemen," observed the Judge, "appear to be in worse condition than when this case started. Are these divorce proceedings making you drunker? Wake that little chap up. His noises make me nervous."

Major Barney reached out and shook Mr. Dinner vigorously. The small man woke up and started to his feet.

"Are we divorced yet?" he inquired.

"No," snapped the Judge. "You're lucky you're not hung. As far as I can see, we haven't got anywhere except deeper and deeper into a morass of immorality."

"Would you like me to tell you about it, your honor?" asked the senior partner.

"Go ahead," retorted the Judge.

"Well," began Mr. Larkin, "it was this way. When we came into the room, there they were in the bed—all three of our wives, and would you believe it, your honor, I don't think they had a stitch between them. And there he was, too, plump in the same bed. Well, your honor, I almost screamed. You should have seen me veer. I had to be held to keep from spinning like a windmill. And he had on a pair of drawers—I didn't actually see the drawers, your honor, and I don't understand how he could have possibly kept them on when you come to consider everything, but he claimed he was wearing his drawers and so I let it go at that. And he was lying all squeezed up between my wife and Mr. Dinner's wife——"

"One moment," interrupted the Judge. "You seem to be enjoying this so much, perhaps you'd like to draw a picture of it."

"I could never do that, your honor," said Mr. Larkin delicately. "It wouldn't be at all nice."

"I appreciate your scruples," heavily observed Judge Hampton. "Sit down and keep quiet."

"Your honor," said Mr. Black, "one of my clients, Mrs. Larkin, to be specific, wishes me to state that her husband is not without blemish."

"I should say not," commented the Judge.

"Three weeks ago," continued Mr. Black, "he, Mr. Larkin,

spent the week-end with the wife of another one of my clients, Mrs. Dinner, to be specific, at a near-by watering resort."

Mr. Dinner looked reproachfully at Mr. Larkin.

"What a thing to do," he said, then fell asleep once more against the pitcher.

The Kitten, furiously angry, sprang to her feet.

"Your honor," she cried, "the reason Nana Larkin is so sure of her ground is that she herself was stopping at the next hotel with no less a person than my shrimp of a husband, and I hope that's specific enough to suit everybody concerned."

It was difficult to judge whether the senior partner looked more surprised than amused. He aroused the slumbering Dinner and shook his limp hand.

"That makes us even," Mr. Larkin said.

Aggie, the wife of the Major, was now confronting the shocked and astounded Judge.

"Your honor," she proclaimed, "as you can easily see for yourself, I am not exactly a cripple. I don't intend to be left out in the cold. I, myself, have spent some pleasant week-ends with both Mr. Larkin and Mr. Dinner. They are altogether different when they're not with their wives. And as for my own husband—my word! He and Nana Larkin have been just like that for years."

Before the shrinking eyes of the Judge she held up two fingers, eloquently pressed together. Even the spectators in the courtroom were too stunned by this unedifying exposé of these extra-marital activities to create the usual buzz of satisfaction and surprise. Many of them were either too afraid or too well bred to look at the Judge.

"Tell that woman to sit down," he croaked. "I don't want to hear any more. Who was it mentioned veering? Well, I'm doing a lot of that myself. Of all the licentious groups this one wins the palm!"

Judge Hampton's voice drifted away. He sank back in his chair and mopped his brow with a large tan handkerchief. The partners were exchanging apologetic glances. Satin and Mr. Owen smiled at them encouragingly. Mr. Larkin waved a debonair hand and raised his glass. When he had finished drink-

ing he passed the glass to the Major, who in turn quaffed deeply, then passed it on to Mr. Dinner. Apparently it would take something far more serious than mutual infidelity to break up the *entente cordiale*. Suddenly Judge Hampton sat forward in his chair. The attorney for the wives received the chilly impression that he was under the observation of those faint blue eyes.

"Go on, Mr. Black," came the spiteful voice of the Judge. "Why don't you say it?"

"Say what, your honor?"

"That at one time or another you have spent week-ends with all these ladies," replied the Judge. "That would bring in everyone involved in this disreputable case except myself. How those women must look forward to Saturdays."

"Unfortunately, your honor," said Mr. Black with a smooth smile, "my relations with my clients have been purely professional."

At the introduction of the word purely Judge Hampton laughed shortly. To some of the spectators the jurist sounded common; to others, merely crazed.

"The criminal immorality of this case almost frightens me," he said. "Here we have three husbands suing their respective wives for divorce. What do we find? A round robin of infidelity—a frantic scramble of corruption. No sooner have they unpacked their bags after one vicious week-end, than they begin repacking them again to pop off on another one with the wife of one of their dearest friends. They're partners, no less. Look at them. They look like a glee club. Probably comparing notes. And why, may I ask, why did they deem it necessary to drag the man Owen and his mistress into court? Each one of those husbands can serve as a co-respondent for the other two. Each one of the wives can act in the same disgusting capacity."

Mr. Larkin was on his feet. His face was flushed from gin, and his eyes were glittering.

"Judge," he said, "we thought you would like to see him. You know, it is rather unusual. My other two partners and myself may have been a trifle informal as regards each other's wives, but Mr. Owen was simply epic. He got all three of

them. Imagine! All three. At the same time and in the same place, at that. And with his avowed mistress present. I wouldn't have believed it possible if I hadn't seen him with my own two eyes. The man should run for office. I'd vote for——"

"Will you please stop going on like that," interrupted Judge Hampton. "Someone might get the impression you knew me personally. I feel slightly tainted to be found in the same courtroom with you and your wives and your partners. Pass that pitcher up here."

Mr. Larkin obediently gave the pitcher to the Judge together with the glass. His honor poured and drank, coughed and drank again.

"Even the water you drink is different," he commented. "Is my face flushed?"

"It's just beginning," replied Mr. Larkin. "That's powerful water, your honor."

"The strongest I ever drank," agreed the Judge. "Hope I don't fall in the pitcher. Would you mind telling me how long you and your partners have been married to these women?"

"Well, your honor," replied Mr. Larkin somewhat uneasily, "properly speaking, we never exactly married them—not legally, we didn't. We forgot to tell you that. But they've been sticking round for a long time now. Nearly ten years."

"Do you mean to say," cried the Judge, leaning incredulously over the desk, "that the three of you are trying to get a divorce from women you haven't even married?"

"Judge Hampton," called Major Barney, "if you can't exactly give us a divorce, couldn't you help us to get rid of them? These women are awful. We want some more."

As the Judge was collapsing in his chair another interruption called him back to life. No less a person than Madame Gloria had burst through the rails.

"Your honor," she cried, pointing at the startled Mr. Owen, "I want to sue that man for breach of promise. I gave myself to him for life and he hasn't even called to get me."

"Do you mean," asked the Judge in a weak voice, "he actually promised to marry you?"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Madame Gloria as if shocked at the

suggestion. "Nothing as stupid as that. I never marry, your honor, I just get kept."

A wild scream rang through the court as the Judge tottered towards his chambers.

"I want to be alone," he mumbled. "Send everybody away and tell them never to come back, especially those partners."

In a compact and not unfriendly mass, wives, husbands, the co-respondent, Owen, with his publicly acknowledged mistress, and even Madame Gloria made their way to the street. As if by common consent they continued across the broad thoroughfare to the nearest café. Here, after much confusion, tables were arranged to accommodate the large party.

"What are we celebrating?" asked Mr. Owen as the senior partner ordered wine in lavish quantities.

"Our reunion," replied Mr. Larkin, smiling across at Nana.

"If we want to get rid of these women," observed Mr. Dinner, "I guess we'll have to marry them first."

"Oh, shucks," said the Major indulgently. "Let them stick around. They're not such bad women."

Chapter XXII. Fire and Farewell

MR. OWEN WAS AWAKENED AT MIDNIGHT BY THE DREAM-shattering jangle of the telephone. He was just as well pleased, for in his current dream the unclad wives of his partners had been chasing him down the aisles of the courtroom into the arms of Madame Gloria, hiding coyly behind a whale. Reaching across a protesting Satin, he hauled the instrument to him.

"I've a big surprise for you," came the casual voice of the senior partner. "The store is burning up, or down, or whichever way stores burn. It really doesn't matter—the shop and all that's in it are heavily overinsured."

"Are you going down?" asked Mr. Owen.

"I thought I would," replied Mr. Larkin. "People might think it unnatural not to watch one's own store burn down. There's a lot of good grog in my office I'd like to get out."

"Are you veering any?" Mr. Owen inquired, knowing it would please his partner.

"Stupendously," cried Mr. Larkin. "I'm simply a dance of flames."

"Then I'll meet you at the store."

Mr. Owen had hardly hung up the receiver when the bell rang again.

"What do you know?" came the voice of Mr. Dinner. "The store is on fire. Isn't that a laugh?"

"Are you going?" asked Mr. Owen.

"Sure," said the voice of the little man. "Have to carry bottles. They belong to his nibs. He'd never stop veering if the fire got them. You know, Owen, I sometimes think he's mad."

"No!" exclaimed Mr. Owen. "You surprise me. See you at the fire."

He hung up, then once more lifted the receiver as the bell gave tongue.

"This is Major Barney Britt-Britt speaking," came the heavy voice of the Major. "Is this Mr. Owen? It is? Fine! Do you want to see a good fire, Owen?"

Mr. Owen did.

"Well, come on down to the store," continued the Major,

"and you'll see a top-notch fire. Of course, inasmuch as we own the store, we'd get first-rate places."

"I'll be right down," said Mr. Owen.

"Excellent," replied the Major. "Thought you might like to see it. Don't get a good fire often. Then there's some liquor in the senior's office that might bear looking into. The rest doesn't matter. The whole damn place is criminally overinsured."

"The store is going up in smoke," Mr. Owen announced to Satin, who was flinging on her clothes, "and all those three maniacs care about is their private supply of grog."

"That proves to me," quoth Miss Honor Knightly, snapping on her garters with a businesslike click, "that their minds are in the right place. More people should be like them. Why not salvage the gay things of life instead of casting about for gloom? There's plenty of that as it is."

Leaving the hotel they hurried to the store and succeeded in gaining entrance through Mr. Larkin's private office. Standing before a huge locker the senior partner and Major Barney were frantically extracting bottles.

"Good-evening," called Mr. Larkin. "The fire is all inside. Flames no end. An inspiring sight." He turned back to the locker. "Major, should we drink this liquor now or carry it away? It might be easier to drink it."

Opening the door to the huge emporium, Satin and Mr. Owen hastened through. Immediately a curtain of flames rolled down and cut off their retreat. Columns of fire and smoke were rising and writhing down the full length of the vast hall. The galleries were filled with heavy clouds. The crackling was so intense that the place seemed full of machine guns. And above the sound of crackling roared the voice of fire rampant.

Glancing back into the senior partner's private office they caught a glimpse of the three charming gentlemen in the act of removing bottles from their lips.

"We'll build a bigger and better store," cried Mr. Larkin, "on the money we'll make from this jolly old conflagration."

A low, ragged wall of flame ran swiftly across the floor, driving Satin and Mr. Owen before it. At the far end of the hall they were stopped by a partition.

"Doesn't look so good," panted Mr. Owen. "I might bite bears and all that, but I can't swallow flames."

"I feel sorry as hell for the devil," she said, "if he has to stand for much of this sort of stuff."

Mr. Owen put a hand behind him, then thrilled as it touched a knob.

"Quick!" he called to Satin. "Come with me."

For a moment the girl hesitated, and Mr. Owen was surprised to see a look of unsuspected tenderness creep into her eyes. Then he opened the door and followed Satin back into the rain. And as an "L" train thundered overhead all that lay behind him seemed to flicker and die out. Dimly, but with desperate eagerness, he tried to recapture something, if only a little, of the past—the past behind the door. The other past was now his present. Once more he was plunged back into it. Raindrops splattered his hot face as he gazed down the glittering reaches of Sixth Avenue. Then he turned to the girl in the doorway, and, like a man still in a dream, he looked deep into her eyes as his lips tried to form a word.

"Don't you even remember my name?" she asked in a low, strained voice.

"Satin," he muttered, taking her face between his hands. "Satin. I remember. Is it all over now—everything? What has ended?"

Honor Knightly nodded.

"Everything," she answered. "We're through, the pair of us."

He dropped his hands from her smooth, fresh face and fumbled in his pockets. His left hand encountered a key. He drew it out and looked at it, the key to his house. Then he looked down at the quiet figure beside him.

"Somehow I know you've been wonderful to me," he said haltingly. "I don't know how to tell you about it all. I'll remember when I begin again—when I get back home." He paused and repeated the word. "Home," he muttered. "All married and everything. I'll be using the 'L' in the morning—just like old times."

Satin held out her hand.

"If you're okay now," she told him. "I'll have to let you go."

"I'm all okay," he said in a flat voice. "Much too okay."

"It's good-bye, then," said Satin, the torturing words scarcely audible. "Don't ever grow too respectable again. I can't help feeling you're still partly mine."

As Mr. Owen stepped out of the doorway back into the rain he was wondering to himself if her lips had brushed his cheek. His old inhibitions had conventionalized his own farewell.

Slowly he moved down the street, his shoulders gradually drooping as he walked. Everything was back with him now—every grim little detail of his days—Lulu, Mal Summers, the office, the threat of business extinction. Satin. Who was Satin? Satin was far behind. New York had swallowed her as soon it would swallow him. He himself swallowed several times. It was no easy matter. How familiar everything was. He wanted to get away. He stopped and gazed into the window of a florist shop. He tried to ease his mind by concentrating on the flowers. Slowly he lowered his head. The flowers grew dim, their color draining out.

From behind came the quick tattoo of flying heels. Small firm hands took hold of him and turned him roughly about. Then arms were around his neck.

"You poor lost soul," he heard her saying. "You poor lost soul. Did you think I'd let you go? God, what a man, what a nice, clean little man! And just because he's married he shakes hands and says good-bye."

"What happened to me?" asked Hector Owen some moments later as they crossed Washington Square in the direction of his house.

"You've been on a mental binge," said Satin. "I'll give you the details later. I picked you up in a department store. You were dazed among a lot of books. Ever since then you've been mine to take care of—and you still are. Keep that before your eyes."

"There seem to have been so many things," he replied, "but a curtain lies between. I can't get them back. Were they all batty, Satin?"

"Not all," the girl told him. "Some of them were disrepeatably real—the best ones. At other times I didn't know where your mind was straying. People get like that, then come back with a snap. There's some sort of a name for it, I believe."

"I came back with you," he said; then, self-consciously, "Do you think I'm so old, Satin?"

"If you must get personal," said Miss Knightly primly, "there were times when you acted so young I wouldn't like to mention them. You were a mere babe in my arms."

"Don't," replied Mr. Owen.

He opened the door to his apartment. The place lay in darkness. He must go and inform Lulu he was going away for good. She would probably wake the neighbors with her cheering. At the door of the bedroom he paused. Out of the darkness a man spoke to him. Mr. Owen shuddered.

"Is that you, honey-bunch?" asked the man.

Mr. Owen felt himself mortally insulted.

"Who the hell are you calling honey-bunch?" he growled snapping on the lights. "I'm honey-bunch's husband."

As the lights flooded the room Lulu, clad in a kimono, came in through another door. There was a song on her lips and a bottle of gin in her hand. When she saw Mr. Owen the song fell flat and she almost dropped the gin.

"I—I thought you were dead or something," said the startled lady.

"It turned out to be something," Mr. Owen informed her. "Is this gentleman the chief mourner?"

The gentleman might have liked that bed once, but now he was looking as if he never wanted to see it again.

"No," faltered Lulu. "When he arrived from Europe he came here looking for you."

"I see," murmured Mr. Owen. "Did he think I was lost in the sheets, perhaps?"

Before Lulu could come back at this Satin popped her head into the room.

"Good God!" cried the man in bed. "That girl is my sister."

"Two good Gods to your one," replied Mr. Owen. "That woman is my wife. Also, I own the bed."

"There's something almost incestuous about all this talk," Satin observed coolly.

"I've been looking all over for you," continued the man in an injured voice. "You shouldn't run off like that, Honor, and let the estate go hang. We wanted to change its management."

"Over my dead body," said Satin. "I'm very fond of its management. And as for you, Tom Knightly, isn't it bad enough to ruin a man's home without wrecking his business?"

Tom Knightly grinned.

"Forget it," he said lazily. "Forget it. You fix things up, kid. I mean no harm. Just a good time Daddy."

But Hector Owen heard none of this. He was in another room, cramming some clothes into a bag. This finished, he walked to the window and looked out across the park. So many things happened, he thought, and when they did happen you really were not as shocked as you had thought you were going to be. Satin came up behind him and slipped her hand into his.

"Isn't it disgraceful?" he asked her.

"What is?" she asked him.

"All of us," he answered.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the girl. "It merely goes to show that after all two wrongs can make it right."

A few minutes later, when Mr. Owen carried his bag away from his home, everyone felt good about it.

At the curb he called to a taxi. The cab drew up.

"Where to?" asked the driver.

Mr. Owen was much too busy to answer. He had never been clever with taxicab doors. He suspected a conspiracy.

"Just start in driving," the girl sang out. "And keep on going. We might hire you for life."

"I hate taxi doors," Mr. Owen explained in an aggrieved voice. "Cabs should be built without any. They deliberately pick me out not to open for. They always stick, these doors."

"And so do I," said Satin, her bad eyes glowing with all sorts of uncensored enticements.

Mr. Owen, to say the least, was most pleasantly impressed. Scarcely a moment later so was Satin. Had she been a nicer girl, a wee bit more conventional and a little less impulsive, she might even have been shocked.

For Hector Owen's inhibitions had passed beyond recall.